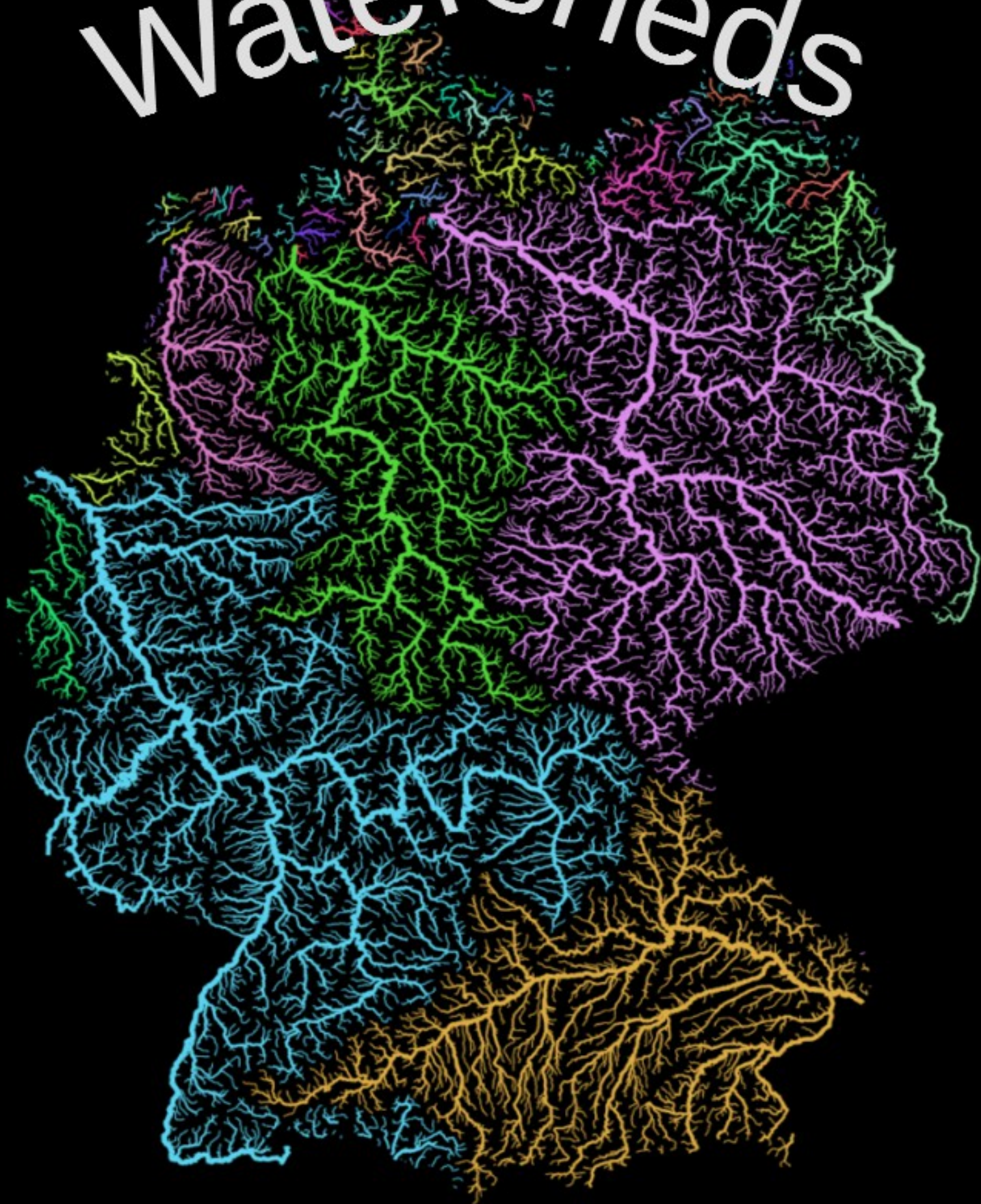


Alfred DeMichele

# Watersheds



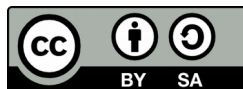
Novel



# Alfred DeMichele – Watersheds

»Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear«  
(George Orwell)

For Julia, Maira and Ingrid



This novel has been translated by artificial intelligence.

Don't blame it – fix it and republish it!



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## Prologue

It started with a press release that ran across the tickers of news agencies on a Thursday morning:

*+++ Genoa, 2 May 2052,*

*Yesterday, an attack was carried out on a pipeline near Genoa. Terrorists caused several powerful explosions in the mountains of the Ligurian Apennines. The pipeline was completely destroyed in three places. Large quantities of crude oil escaped and seeped into the ground. The Central European Pipeline (CEL) is one of the oldest pipelines in Europe and was completed in 1966. Until now, only the section between Genoa and Milan was still in operation. The Milan Council condemned the attack as a despicable act of barbarism directed against the entire population of the Po River domain. The pipeline would be repaired as soon as possible. As long as the work was not completely finished, road and rail transports would ensure the supply of crude oil to the Milan refineries as a substitute. Environmental associations in the Rhenish Lake Constance region called for spontaneous protests against the planned restart of the CEL on the occasion of the attack. Originally, the CEL had connected the oil port of Genoa with the refineries in the former Germany. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.*

Unfortunately, this press release did not receive the attention it deserved. In the hustle and bustle of the coronation celebrations for the new British king, the interest of the mainstream media was focused on other things. Further events therefore took their course unnoticed at first.

## Part 1

### Sea of lights

*»Problem solved. Enough for today!«*

David Jonas closes his notebook. Once again, he has been asked to rescue a user's data, which the user had carelessly sent into the digital orca despite repeated requests from the system. David was just about to knock off work when his boss asked him for this "small favour".

*»You know a lot about computers!« he had pretended. »My colleague has a little problem with his computer. I'm sure it's nothing to you!«*

And then David had to spend hours saving what could still be saved. But what else could he expect from his boss and client Thomas Prenninger? He is excellent at talking smart and letting others pull the chestnuts out of the fire. At least he himself is still sitting in the office at this time. But who should be waiting for him at home? David swears that this was the last time he let himself be talked into doing such an idiot's job. After all, he works here as a freelance database specialist and that's exactly what his employment contract says. He pulls the door of the manager's office shut behind him and walks to the end of the long, dark corridor. There he enters his boss's office.

*»Well David, problem solved?« he greets him with a broad grin.*

*»Yes - the usual! The error was once again sitting in front of the keyboard.«*

Thomas Prenninger just nods silently. David can see what he is thinking:

*»Let the computer fuzzy do his job. After all, he is well paid for it.«*

*»How is the current project going?« he wants to know and looks at David.*

*»Everything on schedule. Yesterday we reached the milestone on time.«*



David slides him his timesheet to sign off.

*»What is the date today?« asks Thomas.*

*»May 7, 2052.«*

While his boss meticulously checks the time sheet, David's gaze wanders through the office to the window. Not a bad view from the 27th floor of the office tower in the middle of Vienna's banking district. Especially at night. From up here, the city looks like a sea of lights. David is passionate about photography and fascinated by all the images of his city. He finds that nothing illustrates change as vividly as photographs. Even night shots. Sure, the silhouettes of the buildings changed over time, while the dark ribbon of the Danube and the mountain ranges in the distance always remained the same. As a technology freak, what has always fascinated him about night photos is that the lighting is also constantly changing. LED light, incandescent lamps, gas lamps: at all times, the city was bathed in a different light at night and captured in historical photographs.

*»Surely I can take a photo from up here?« David asks rather casually and holds his smartphone very close to the glass pane.*

*»If you have to. You can also come by during the day. Then you'd see something too!«*

*»My new mobile phone has super optics. It can even take pictures in these light conditions.«*

It's a pity that photography was invented so late. How it would have looked like at night in Roman times, when Vienna was still called Vindobona. Anyone who had to travel at night needed a torch. And those who were a little better off had a torchbearer. It first became halfway bright at the beginning of the 19th century when the first gas lanterns were lit. It was to take a hundred years before electric light slowly took hold: Carbon filament lamps, gas discharge lamps, cold and warm LED lamps. Every era had its own light at night. Or no light at all. Like during the first great war, when money and resources were scarce and savings had to be

made at every turn. Or during the second great war, so that enemy bombers would not find their targets. Or like shortly after the great collapse, when the lights literally went out all over the world.

David was still a child then. The talk of hard times gets on his nerves. He is alive today and living well. And if he should have children one day, hopefully they will be fine too.

*»Good night, Thomas! Don't work so late anymore!«*

*»Good night. I still have a little bit to go. See you at the kickoff meeting tomorrow?«*

*»I guess it can't be avoided,« David replies and sighs softly.*

He takes the lift down and wishes the doorman a good night. His car is parked in the underground garage. He unplugs the power cable and checks the battery indicator. 90 per cent - almost full. At least in this respect the evening was worthwhile.

At home in his small flat, he falls into bed dead tired. Five hours of sleep until the alarm sounds.

## **Young Romans**

Also in May 2052, but in a different place:

Rome - Capital of the Tiber domain.

Gianna Marconi has been standing on the Angel Bridge for an hour, waiting.

*»When is that guy finally coming?« she thinks angrily.*

She looks at her watch for the thousandth time. The ominous e-mail sender had wanted to be here at half past three. Gianna snorts. She shouldn't have gotten involved. "Explosive information!" she thinks. Sure! It's always "explosive information" that her subscribers want to send her. As a journalist and video blogger, she had often picked up on tips she received via email. But usually the tipsters had wanted to be named. In this case,

Gianna hadn't even been able to find out who had sent the e-mail. That might have made her suspicious. But in reality, that was what had piqued her curiosity. Now she curses herself for it. She looks at her watch again: Half past four already!

Gianna's eyes wander to the end of the bridge, where the defiant Engelsburg in its dirty brown stands in stark contrast to the azure sky. It stands there as if fallen out of time. Barricaded and locked for a long time. It is said that priests from the Vatican sometimes enter the Castel Sant'Angelo at night via the Passetto di Borgo, an escape passage from the Middle Ages that cannot be seen, and celebrate orgies there. Gianna thinks this is a wild rumor. One of the many that surround this building and the Vatican. Nevertheless, she regularly gets goose bumps when she sees Castel Sant'Angelo. Why is that?

*»Five more minutes. I won't wait any longer!« she scolds.*

Yesterday she had received the e-mail. The sender had promised her explosive information and wanted to hand it over to her here and now. But far and wide there is no one to make eye contact with her. He wrote that he knew what she looked like and that he would personally hand her an envelope.

There is not much going on here on this bridge. Now and then a horse-drawn vehicle, a motorcycle or a tricycle. Cars are not allowed to cross here, but there are hardly any cars left in Rome anyway.

*»If he had at least written what I could recognize him by.«*

Gianna examines the older man who is coming toward her. But he doesn't seem to take any notice of her. He carries a worn briefcase under his arm and has a cigarette butt in his mouth. Their eyes meet briefly, but then he passes her and disappears in the direction of Piazza Ponte Sant'Angelo.

*»There's no point in that anymore today. Maybe he'll get back to me.«*

Gianna goes to her scooter, folds up the seat, takes out her helmet and slips it over her curly head. A quick press of the electric starter and the Vespa starts up. Let's go home! Gianna drives onto the left bank of the Tiber and follows the course of the river to the Ponte Garibaldi. There she crosses the river and is not far from her home in Trastevere. In the courtyard of her apartment building, she parks the Vespa and carefully chains it to the massive grating of a basement window.

Still wearing sunglasses and a helmet, she jumps up the stairs to the third floor. The beautiful old elevator in the middle of the stairwell has long been out of service. Gianna and her flatmates don't care, but her old, walking-impaired neighbors care less.

Two years ago, Gianna left home and moved into the shared apartment three houses away. There are enough empty apartments in today's Rome since there was a mass exodus from the city after the great collapse. The population could no longer be adequately fed and, driven by hunger, moved to rural areas.

This did not diminish Rome's legendary status as the "Eternal City". It had often experienced good and bad times in the course of its history. When the Roman Empire had perished or the Vandals had plundered the city, this had always been accompanied by a rapid decline in the number of inhabitants. Now it was that time again and the city was waiting for the next upswing, which would surely come at some point.

Gianna loves her city. She wouldn't move to the country for anything in the world. She only knows about the hard times from hearsay and her parents' stories. She knows, of course, from old films what life was like in Rome before the great crisis. In many respects, life back then was obviously less complicated and more consumer-oriented than she had known it from childhood. Gianna used to like to dream herself back to the old days: Going shopping in Via Condotti or enjoying the debauched nightlife in Trastevere. As a young girl, she would have given a lot to spend a day and a night in that bygone world. Today, the former posh shopping temples are

ruins of marble and glass. And Trastevere is once again a quiet residential district. Cows even graze on the Roman Forum at times. There is plenty of housing in the city and the streets, though in poor condition, are no longer clogged with smelly cars.

Gianna unlocks the door to her apartment. Her roommates Marco and Maria are obviously not there. In the kitchen she finds some cookies. Next to them in the sink is the espresso pot, smiling irresistibly at her. While the water slowly gets hot, Gianna opens her notebook and checks her e-mails.

## **Modern times**

At seven o'clock, David's smartphone sounds the alarm. The sun is already shining into his bedroom and makes getting up bearable. After showering, he takes a quick look at the clock: He still has enough time to have breakfast in peace and take the day slowly. While the coffee machine does its work, David switches on the large room monitor:

*»Alexandra, find me a station that's doing news right now!«*

*»Yes David, I'm switching to TV Vienna.«*

The monitor's voice assistant bears the name of David's second-to-last girlfriend. He had already planned to rename it several times. On the other hand, he finds the name similarity to one of the first antediluvian voice controls incredibly retro. Unfortunately, hardly any of his contemporaries understand this joke. And his last girlfriend especially did not. After David is informed about the current news, he calls:

*»Alexandra, what are my appointments today?«*

*»You have an appointment today at ten o'clock at the Central Bank, building 5, meeting room Lech«.*

At least they reserved a decent room this time! The meeting rooms in the bank are named after rivers and the Lech, as a direct tributary to the Danube, forms a Level 2 domain after all. Yesterday, he and his colleagues had spent half the day in "Cibin"; a small retreat room that owes its name



to the Level 3 domain Cibin.Olt.Danube - and thus to an insignificant river in Wallachia<sup>1</sup> .

*»Alexandra, tell me about the Lech!«*

*»The Lech is a 264 kilometer long right tributary of the Danube. The domain capital of the domain Lech.Danube is Augsburg. The estuary of the domain Wertach.Lech.Danube is located in Augsburg. «*

Last year, David and Alexandra - not the one with the computer voice, but the one with the sexy butt - went to Augsburg for work. They hadn't seen much of the city, but there was enough time for a short walk through the historic city center. Alexandra really wanted to visit the Fuggerei, one of the oldest social housing estates in Europe. Supposedly, the rent once consisted of saying a few prayers every day for the founder of the foundation, Jakob Fugger, and his family.

David lives in a former municipal building in Vienna's 19th district and would be happy if the rent could be paid by praying. Vienna's municipal buildings were once intended to provide cheap housing for the ordinary population. However, there is no sign of that today. The Kaiser Franz Josef Residenz, where David's apartment is located, was once called Karl Marx Hof. However, the former municipal building has been luxuriously renovated several times and is now only inhabited by well-off yuppies<sup>2</sup>.

*»Alexandra, what's the best way to get to my meeting by car?«*

*»Shortly before ten o'clock, the traffic will have calmed down again. Drive your car along the Danube via Handelskai and park in the underground car park of the Millennium Tower.«*

As David sits in the car and drives along the Danube, his thoughts turn again to water and its significance today. How had it come about? Back then, after the big crash. His parents had often told him about the terrible times when economies around the world went off the rails and all of

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<sup>1</sup> Wallachia: Historical Landscape in the Olt.Danube Domain, the former South Romania

<sup>2</sup> Yuppie: Young Urban Professional

humanity was temporarily plunged into inconceivable chaos. With sovereign bankruptcies moving like dominoes across the globe, nation-states were disintegrating. No one knew what the future would look like and what forms of society would one day emerge from it all.

At that time, many do-gooders and charlatans were out and about, all trying to spread their doctrines of salvation among the people. After the crash, everyone claimed to have foreseen it and could name the culprits at the drop of a hat. David's father also claims to this day that he had seen the signs of the impending downfall years before. Every time this topic comes up in conversation with his parents, it's time to get out of the way and avoid the inevitable argument.

Today's domain system was initially laughed at and considered to be the brainchild of a few crackpot theorists. Surprisingly, however, it has become established in many regions of the world. Probably for one reason: It is based on borders that have always existed and can never change. After all the wars and quarrels of the past centuries, mankind had apparently reached a point where this was considered a decisive argument.

Every person with a fixed residence can be clearly located in the domain system. This depends on the river system in which he lives and the sea into which he drains. David, as a resident of Vienna, belongs to the Danube domain. The fact that Vienna was appointed the domain capital was very controversial for a long time. In the end, a referendum was held throughout the domain, in which Vienna narrowly prevailed over competitors such as Budapest and Belgrade.

In the sub-domains, too, there was a great deal of wrangling and haggling at the time over the appointment of the respective provincial capital. In the referendums, the municipality with the largest population in the respective river basin often - but not always - prevailed.

Today's domain system connects many regions that used to be demarcated from each other as nation states. For the Austrians, the creation of the Danube domain seemed almost a bit like a return to the good old days of

the imperial and royal monarchy. Other nation states, such as the former Federal Republic of Germany, tore it apart into several individual domains. While most of the former Free State of Bavaria became a part of the Danube domain, the other German states found themselves in the Rhine, Ems, Weser, Elbe and Oder river systems, all of which are now main domains in their own right.

*»What would the world look like today without the domain system?« David asks himself as he drives into the underground parking garage.*

## **Trastevere**

Gianna has closed her notebook again. No new mail from the great unknown. In the meantime, her roommates Marco and Maria have also come home.

Marco works as a mechanic in a workshop during the day. Gianna thinks the world of him. After all, he is the one who keeps her old Vespa running. Just last week he had replaced some belts and rollers after Gianna had mentioned rather casually that her vehicle was making unusual noises. The following morning he drove her scooter to his garage and when he came home in the evening, the little Vespa was purring again like on the first day of its long life.

Maria works as a primary school teacher at a private school in Trastevere. In recent years, the number of children had risen again and Maria was happy that she could finally earn a living in her dream job. However, all three of them do not earn much money. But for the apartment they have to pay only quite little rent to the municipality and otherwise they also live very frugally.

Gianna is nevertheless dependent on her parents for support. She graduated from a journalism school and works freelance for various online newspapers. But she can't live on that. Together with Salvatore, a journalist friend, she started a video blog last year, in which they interview people from Rome on camera at irregular intervals. The number of their blog

subscribers was initially very manageable, but in recent months their channel has spread and the number of clicks on their videos is slowly but steadily increasing.

*»Tell me Gianna, how did your secret meeting at Castel Sant'Angelo go?« Marco asks casually.*

He doesn't much like Gianna's so-called investigative work and likes to make fun of it.

*»Didn't show up, the guy. He left me standing around stupidly on the bridge for an hour. I was surprised that no one asked me to come to his apartment with him or anything like that.«*

*»Yes, it is said that in this area, even during the day, lonely men often look around for brief acquaintances.«*

Marco alludes to the proximity of the Vatican. After Rome's economic decline, it became the city's most important economic factor. The worse times became, the more the Catholic Church regained its importance, which was shown by increasing membership and also by bubbling revenues.

*»Doesn't your father work near there?« Marco inquires.*

*»How many times do I have to tell you that my father is only occasionally busy at the Vatican? He mostly does his work at home!«*

Gianna is annoyed. Marco doesn't like her father very much and lets that slip at every opportunity with pointed remarks. He is probably not Italian enough for him because he was born in Germany. Gianna, on the other hand, loves her "Fatti tedesco". He had once worked at the German embassy. But when he met and married Gianna's mother, he quickly mutated into a real Roman and only if you listen closely, you can hear a slight German accent from his words.

Gianna's mother had also worked in the diplomatic service in the past, which is where the two of them ran into each other and love took its

course. After the big crash, however, there was nothing to be earned from diplomacy, and Gianna's parents went through a difficult time. While the mother tried to keep the family afloat with tailoring work, the father could occasionally contribute his language skills to the various remaining institutions. In the end, it was the Vatican that frequently commissioned him with translations from and into German.

*»Gianna, when are your parents coming over for dinner again?«  
Maria interferes in the conversation.*

*»I don't know, I'll ask her next time I see her.«*

Gianna can't help but laugh. When her parents visit her in the shared apartment for dinner, it usually looks like the three shared apartment residents set the table nicely and do the dishes at the end. The food is brought by Gianna's mother and prepared with great attention to detail. Of course, she is showered with compliments from all sides while she is cooking and even more so during the meal. But basically it is her parents who finance the food and her mother who does the work. Nevertheless, her mother has not yet refused any of these "invitations" and her father is actually always quite happy when he can talk to the young people and tell old stories.

*»Are you guys free this coming Sunday? If so, I'll ask them if they'd like to come for dinner.«*

*»Yes, of course!« Maria and Marco answered as if from one mouth.*

## **Kickoff**

When David enters the meeting room, his colleagues are almost all assembled. Only his boss Thomas Prenninger is still missing.

*»Has anyone seen our project manager today?« asks Klaus, who, like David, works as a freelance IT specialist at the central bank.*

*»He was still in his office last night,« David replies. »He probably spent the night there and overslept!«*



At the same moment Thomas enters the door.

*»A very good morning to you all!«*

Even as he pours his coffee, he gets down to business:

*»What we are going to talk about today is subject to secrecy!  
Before we start, you all have to sign a confidentiality agreement.  
Does anyone have a problem with that?«*

The colleagues grin at each other. The ritual is well known to them. Silently, they pass the signature list around and sign in the place designated for them. When the list arrives back at Thomas, he takes a quick, scrutinizing look at it and lets the form disappear into his pocket.

*»Good - so much for formalities.«*

He opens his notebook and connects it to the meeting room's multimedia system. The beamer throws a map of Europe onto the wall, showing the domain boundaries defined by the respective river systems.

*»The point is this: As I'm sure you all know, the Rhine, Weser, Elbe, Po and Danube domain governments have recently agreed to remove trade barriers and align their currency systems. In addition, a few economically strong dwarf domains are to be integrated into this trade union.«*

David examines the faces of his colleagues and thinks to himself, »What the fuck? We're technicians! What's this guy got to do with politics now?« The others seem to see it similarly. Thomas Prenninger, however, continues unmoved:

*»You also know how difficult it was and how long it took to introduce a common currency within the Danube domain. But the fact is that today the Danube Thaler has become accepted throughout the entire domain and is recognized as legal tender everywhere from Ulm to the Black Sea.«*

David remembers from history class how many regional currencies there have been since the decline of the world economy. Especially in the early

years after the big crash, each provincial government had created its own currency system. David had grown up in a small town in the Bavarian Forest. He can still remember his father handing him his first pocket money: Five Black Regenmarks. David had wondered why these shiny coins were called black Regenmarks. Only much later did he realize that this had to do with the domain "BlackRegen.Regen.Danube" where his family lived.

*»So, are we going to reintroduce the euro now?« he asks the group.*

General laughter. Everyone knows the stories from the end times of global financial capitalism, when the euro was first introduced with much euphoria in the European nation states and then contributed significantly to their collapse.

*»No, of course not,« Thomas Prenninger reassures the team. »I already think that our politicians have learned from the past. There are plans to establish an overarching clearinghouse institution that will map, calculate and settle the financial equalization of cross-domain trade flows.«*

Everywhere in the circle only questioning faces. No one understood what the project manager had just said.

*»You don't have to understand this now either. The only important thing is that the banks in our domain, and especially our central bank, provide a suitable interface to this new settlement system. Developing this interface is your job.«*

»Not bad!« David thinks to himself. Sounds like a few man-years of development effort! In the coming months, he would have enough to do with that and wouldn't have to worry about bringing in new orders.

*»When do we start?« Klaus asks curiously.*

*»As soon as your work contracts are signed. Do any of you know today that he or she will not have time next year? Or does anyone have problems of a fundamental nature to work on this project?«*

There is general silence in the group. Most of the freelance colleagues are probably as pleasantly surprised as David, and the permanent employees of the central bank present are left out of such considerations anyway. They have to do what they are told.

*»Good, I didn't expect anything else either! The further details will be distributed to you in due course.«*

*Klaus wants to know a little more, though: »Do we already have any ideas about how we'll divide up the work in the team, or can we organize ourselves there?«*

Thomas Prenninger has to grin. It's always the same with this subversive IT squad. They always want to work as independently as possible, but then they always need someone to give them direction.

*»No, I will discuss the distribution of tasks with my superiors and the results will then be communicated to you. As for you Klaus, however, I would assume that you and David will be responsible for the database connection of the system due to your expertise.«*

David Jonas and Klaus Baumann briefly exchange glances. That was no real surprise! The two had often worked together on projects at the central bank and had come to appreciate each other. Both professionally and personally.

They both come from the Bavarian province, albeit from completely different corners. They had moved to Vienna at about the same time after their education. At some point, their home country had become too small for both of them and they were both looking for a professional challenge in the domain metropolis of Vienna. They had met during a small IT project at an insurance company. After work, they had often roamed the pubs and coffeehouses together and talked about God and the world - and admittedly also a lot about computer programs.

At the time, David also got his apartment through Klaus. Almost nothing works on the Viennese housing market without connections. Klaus had given David the tip about the apartment that was becoming available and

also put him in touch with the manager of the housing complex. After that, everything happened very quickly and after two weeks David was able to move out of his initially furnished emergency quarters into his yuppie apartment.

At first, he felt this put him in Klaus's debt, but by now their favor balances were even. Klaus had gotten the current job at the central bank, for example, through a recommendation from David. Thomas Prenninger had asked David if he knew of a good database administrator. Sure, he had answered, and a week later Klaus had the job. Even though he had some basic knowledge about databases at that time, he was anything but a specialist! But in the end it didn't matter. At the end of the project, they had both done the job properly and at the latest at this point, Klaus could call himself a real database professional with a clear conscience.

*Thomas Prenninger continues, »I will use the remainder of our meeting to provide you with some more important background information on monetary policy and the resulting requirements for the project.«*

But David doesn't really listen anymore. He doesn't have much to do with politics. He's already learned what's important to him in this meeting. Let his boss ramble on.

For the rest of the event, David's thoughts revolve around completely different things. For example, how much candy he was able to buy for five black Regenmarks at good Mrs. Adam's kiosk back then. His gaze wanders out of the window of the meeting room on the 34th floor of the Millennium Tower, across the Danube to the chains of hills on the horizon, behind which the Elbe catchment area and thus another world already begins.

## **Scaloppine ai funghi**

On Sunday at eleven o'clock in the morning, almost on time, Gianna's parents ring the doorbell of the shared apartment.

*»Ciao Mamma, Ciao Vati,« Gianna hugs her parents while still in the stairwell. »Come on in!«*

Together they enter the long dark hallway from which all the rooms of the shared apartment branch off: The three bedrooms, the bathroom, the toilet and the large eat-in kitchen, which is the social center of the apartment and where most of the flat-sharing life takes place.

*»Hello Signora and Signore Marconi!« Maria warmly greets the entering couple, »How are you?«*

*»Thank you very much, and yourself?« Gianna's mother answers as warmly as she is delighted.*

Marco also says a friendly »Hello« and then returns to the task assigned to him by his roommates: He neatly distributes the cutlery and drinking glasses next to the plates and, with the help of a fresh dishtowel, checks the cleanliness of all the items distributed. He meticulously polishes all the glasses again and checks them in the light of the sun, which is already quite high, before they find their final place on the set dining table.

*»What are we cooking today?« Gianna asks curiously.*

*Her mother answers a little embarrassed: »I went to the market yesterday in Piazza San Cosimato and got five veal cutlets. There were also potatoes, mushrooms and some vegetables. So we are cooking scaloppine ai funghi con patate. I also brought some sprigs of the rosemary that I grow on our balcony.«*

Everyone is thrilled; especially when Gianna's father conjures up another bottle of good red wine from the burlap bag he brought with him.

*»From my iron holdings!« he proudly proclaims.*

The women start peeling the potatoes and cleaning the vegetables together, while Marco and Gianna's father take a seat at the dining table and make some small talk.

*»Well Marco, how's business at your garage?«*



*»Not too good. We don't have enough to do to keep all the people fully occupied every day.«*

*»But I already have a feeling that the number of cars on the road is slowly increasing again.«*

*»Oh, you know, Signore Marconi, most Romans can only afford a motorcycle at best. The main problem with cars is spare parts. For years it has been impossible to get spare parts for repairs and our work consists mainly of cannibalizing old cars and recycling their still usable parts. Since the collapse of the car industry, no new cars have come to Rome. The last cars built were intentionally designed not to last. And the cars built before that, which were still of reasonably good quality, have since been eaten away by rust.«*

In fact, Marco's garage deals almost exclusively with old motorcycles. At least you can still tinker with them and, if need be, even make a spare part yourself on a temporary basis. Cars, with all their electronic stuff, have always been suspect to him.

*»But new cars have long since been built on our peninsula. In Turin, the Fiat factories have just announced a new electric car again!«*

*»Yes Signore Marconi, that is correct. In the north, the industry got back on its feet quickly. But they had a completely different starting point in their huge Po domain! A functioning agriculture to ensure the feeding of the population in the big cities and modern industrial sites to produce competitive products.«*

*»I know what you mean, Marco. The South has been left behind economically. What do we have to offer here in our mini-domain as trade goods. We urgently need the products from agriculture ourselves, so that our own people do not starve. How are we supposed to buy cars from the rich northern domains when we are already struggling to supply our old Vespas with gasoline.«*

From the kitchenette it already smells deliciously of food. The cutlets are sizzling in hot olive oil and a scent of garlic and rosemary is in the air.

*»I don't think it will be long now,« Marco says. "Do you want me to open the wine already?«*

*»Yes, with pleasure! The good drop should quietly breathe a little more before we ingest it.«*

Gianna's father was never averse to a good glass of wine his whole life. Unfortunately, circumstances no longer allow him to indulge in his old vice. It is not that there is no good wine to be had in Rome today. It is rather a question of money. The bottle he brought with him was purchased at a wine market a few years ago. The seller had a selection of regional wines with him, which he was happy to let his potential customers taste. Gianna's father had come home with four bottles of red wine from Cesanese del Piglio and a good smell of alcohol, and had to listen to his wife's vehement reproaches. After all, it is she who has supremacy over the finances in the Marconi house, and she had made that unmistakably clear to him on that occasion.

*»Kids sit down, dinner is almost ready!«*

At this command of the Signora Marconi, everyone immediately takes their place. The three women distribute the food, Gianna's father says a short grace and praises the cook's art in detail. Then there is an epicurean silence. Everyone at the table knows, but no one talks about it: It has been weeks since they last afforded such an expensive feast.

## **Dark clouds on the horizon**

Many years before, in a small German town west of Cologne:

Peter Eckert sits in his hobby room at the computer, staring wide-eyed at the current stock charts.

*»This can't be right anymore!«*

This curve reminds him more of the recordings of a seismograph. Like the ones you see on TV whenever a catastrophic earthquake has once again briefly caught the attention of the world public.

In recent years, Peter Eckert had made decent profits on the stock market. After the interest rates on his savings first approached zero and then even drifted into negative territory, he turned the tide and started investing in stocks. So far, he has not regretted this step, but what had happened on the stock markets in the past weeks had given him a few more gray hairs. And that's with the few he has left anyway!

»You mustn't see this as a crisis, but as an opportunity!« That's what his bank advisor, whom he knew from his school days, said. He said, »Buy when the guns are roaring!« and stuff like that. But Peter Eckert didn't hear any cannons. Sometimes he sees them on TV: In Syria or Ukraine, far away and somehow not really scary. Was this already the crisis? Or are we on the verge of it? Should I better sell now, and if so, what will I do with the money?

»With large price fluctuations you can also realize large profits!« was another such wisdom. Had also worked a few times, but went even more often in the pants!

*»It's all a gamble at the expense of the little ones!«*

How should a small investor like him stand a chance against the investment departments of the big banks? By studying online charts on his computer after work and then placing buy or sell orders in online banking? Meanwhile, the professional competition is fighting for every millisecond that it could be faster than the rest of the world in order to convert this time advantage directly into a money advantage.

*»No, Peter Eckert is not that stupid to let himself be taken to the cleaners by the banks! I follow my long-term investment strategy and will continue to do well with it. And so that nothing can go wrong, I have set a few suitable stop-loss orders as a precaution!«*

## **Temptation**

David and Klaus had spent the whole day in their project room in the Millennium Tower, working through countless requirements documents.

Afterwards, both of their heads were smoking and they decided to end the day with a pub crawl.

They have already been to three pubs and had six beers when they decide to go to one of the trendy bars under the arches of the Vienna Stadtbahn.

*»It's already pretty crowded here!« Klaus shouts against the deafening music.*

*»Yeah, I think there's some space back there.«*

They sit down at a small bistro table in the dim corner of the restaurant. Here the music is a bit more subdued than in the front, where the bass of the speakers makes the brain vibrate and conversation is halfway possible.

*»Tell me, how do you actually like the new project?« asks Klaus.*

Oh man, the guy is still thinking about work. Doesn't he have anything else on his mind today?

*»I think it's okay. Been through worse.«*

*»Me too. Already much worse! But still I feel slow, like a hamster in his wheel. Constantly running from one project to the next and still not making any progress.«*

Man, what's Klaus like again today? Whenever he has drunk too much beer, he gets his philosophical and doubts the meaning of his life.

*David replies, »What's so bad about the way things are? Do you want to make a career? Or do you want to be an idiot for the bosses like our armchair project manager? Nah nah my dear, I'd rather be the head of the asses than the ass of the heads.«*

Klaus has to grin. He likes David's way of getting to the heart of some things very simply. Then he looks around and when he is sure that no one is standing next to them, he leans over to David and says directly into his ear:

*»Making a career? No thanks! But I do wonder sometimes why we toil away every day for our modest income while other people spin the big wheel and rake in the big bucks in the process.«*

*»And what do you plan to do specifically? Are you going to get into the basement of the Central Bank and take a blowtorch to the big vault?«*

*Klaus' eyes narrow: »No, I don't know anything about that. I would probably literally burn my fingers. But sometimes there are situations where the money is lying on the street and you just have to pick it up.«*

*»Can you maybe explain what you mean by that?«*

*Klaus answers evasively: »No, I can't explain that to you now. The matter is too hot for me to drag you into it now.«*

David's alarm bells start to ring.

*»Say, do you do any crooked things at the bank?«*

*»Oh nonsense! Of course not! But it could be that you get wind of crooked things of other people and can profit from it yourself.«*

David is perplexed. But before he can inquire further about what Klaus is babbling about, two good-looking young women join them at the table.

*»May we join you?« asks the blondere of the two in the broadest Viennese dialect.*

*»Go ahead, beautiful woman!« replies Klaus reflexively.*

David has to smile. His friend has seamlessly switched from greed to courtship mode. Immediately he begins to talk down to the blonde: What she's up to, what he's up to, where she's from, and so on and so forth. After a quarter of an hour, the two disappear on the dance floor, never to be seen again.

Despite the deafening music, David tries to talk to the blonde's companion for a while. At some point, however, she also disappears in the direction of the dance floor, leaving him alone.

David waits a while for his colleague, but then pays for his beer and leaves the club.

*»Fresh air at last!«*

Outside on the street, the elevated train rattles out of town. David can see into the brightly lit compartments. Only a few isolated passengers are heading toward their dormitories in the Viennese suburbs at this hour. Most of them stare hypnotized at their smartphones or doze off with their heads down. David feels the vibration of the ground beneath his feet, but compared to the sound level in the pub, the rhythmic thundering of the steel wheels on the rails is almost a boon to his ears.

He walks through the garishly lit streets of Vienna's amusement district. By now it's midnight and the nightlife is starting to pick up speed. But David has had enough for today. At Thaliastrasse, he hails a cab. The driver asks him for his destination in a hard Eastern European accent.

*»Why do almost all cab drivers actually come from the former Romania or Bulgaria?«* David thinks to himself after he has given the driver the address of his apartment and drops wearily into the soft leather of the back seat.

## **Hiking day**

The feast with Gianna's parents is over. The hosts and guests have settled down for an espresso in the cozy sitting area with its old upholstered furniture.

*»Gianna, my neighbor said she saw you on TV the other day!«*

*»Mamma, she probably means my video blog.«*

*»Whatever that means, where you were talking to the old guide.«*

Together with Salvatore, Gianna had filmed a report about the time when Rome was still a mecca for tourists from all over the world. Her peers really only knew about tourism from the stories told by their parents and grandparents. The report was therefore met with lively interest, especially among young people, and brought them many new subscribers for their video channel.

Many pilgrims from all over the world still come to Rome in 2052. However, transportation and their accommodation is firmly in the hands of the Vatican. The pilgrims from the rich domains usually land by plane at Giovanni Paolo II Airport in Fiumicino. From there they are immediately transferred to the comfortable hotels that have been newly built in recent years on the edge of the Vatican Gardens. The poorer pilgrims are collected at the bus station and taken to the simple hostels on the Vatican grounds. Throughout their stay, pilgrims usually remain within the walls of the Vatican. After the completion of the festivities and ceremonies, they then leave the city just as quickly as they arrived. They are strongly warned against visiting the city. The city is very dangerous for strangers and robberies are common.

*»You know Mamma, the old guide is an acquaintance of Salvatore. For years he has raved about the golden times he experienced in his youth. At some point Salvatore had the idea for the reportage. We walked through the city center together for a day and Salvatore filmed while the old man told me about the old days.«*

*»I could tell you a few things about that, too!« Gianna's father interjects. »Would I be on TV then, too?«*

*»Oh dad, I've explained to you so many times that a video blog has nothing to do with television.«*

*»I know that, my child. Your mother and I witnessed the emergence of the Internet back then. We can even remember how the first bloggers appeared on the scene with Jutube or whatever*

*it was called back then. You'd laugh your head off if you watched the old videos from that time!«*

Maria and Marco cast furtive glances at each other. In a moment, Gianna's father would again tell his stories from the good old days. High time to change the subject.

*»I was exploring downtown with my elementary school class the other day,« Maria begins to share. "There was some concern from parents beforehand, worried about the safety of the little ones. It wasn't until we organized a delegation of vigilantes to escort them that most of the children were allowed to participate in this walking tour.«*

*»The Bambini never get out of their neighborhood!« Marco begins to get excited. »The parents should be happy when the school organizes such excursions.«*

*»It was also a good time for everyone. We started walking in Trastevere and made our first stop on the Tiber Island. The monks there were delighted with our young visit and took us all over the grounds and also through the church of San Bartolomeo. From there we continued across Campo de' Fiori to Piazza Navona.«*

*»Is there still the little ice cream parlor with the delicious chocolate ice cream?« Marco wants to know.*

*»Yes, they're still there,« Maria continues. »However, I would have liked to avoid this visit. Because only half of the children had pocket money from their parents and could afford a scoop of tartufo. The others had to watch them lick it.«*

*»The world is just unfair,« is all that comes to Gianna's father's mind. »You can't learn that early enough.«*

*»After our break in Piazza Navona, we walked to Corso Vittorio Emanuele and crossed the bridge over the Tiber River at the end of the street. The kids really wanted to see St. Peter's Square and the Duomo, but unfortunately nothing came of it. The Swiss Guard people wouldn't let us in without a pass.«*



*»That's typical again!« Marco starts to rant. »I can't stand these guys. No matter where you run into them in town, they treat you like dirt!«*

*»Yes, yes,« Gianna's mother replies. »I can still remember how they used to walk through the Vatican in their puppet costumes. They were always quite likeable guys back then. Today I always have a bad feeling when I see one of them: black clothes, sunglasses, and usually armed to the teeth.«*

Gianna's father takes a more relaxed view of the matter:

*»It is just a security association, as it is supposed to exist everywhere in the world by now. The Vatican has power and money. That creates a lot of envy in the city. I think it is therefore already legitimate for the Vatican to defend itself against the riffraff.«*

Marco finds it increasingly difficult to remain calm:

*»And that's why you have to defend St. Peter's Square against a bunch of elementary school kids? The bambini would hardly have looted the church treasures and kidnapped the pope. It's the other way around: How many of the fine gentlemen come secretly into our city at night under cover of darkness? Do you know how many of our women prostitute themselves to feed their children? Is it a coincidence that today almost all Roman brothels are located around the Vatican?«*

Maria tries to calm Marco down:

*»So come on, Marco. Prostitution has been around in Rome for a while now. It's really not a new invention of the Vatican.«*

Gianna sees her mother casting reproachful glances in the direction of her husband. But before the situation starts to get embarrassing, Marco gets going again:

*»Nevertheless - I still maintain that the Vatican is the thorn in the flesh of our city. I see nothing positive about this institution. Gianna, by the way, I think that the guy who stood you up on the*

*Bridge of Angels the other day has something to do with the Vatican too!«*

If Gianna's looks could kill, Marco would have dropped dead on the spot. Promptly her father asks with a worried expression:

*»Gianna, what does Marco mean by that?«*

*»Oh, nothing special. In our last video blogs, Salvatore and I had reported quite critically on the relationship between the Vatican and the city of Rome. As a result, someone contacted me anonymously and indicated that he had some interesting documents for me. He wanted to hand them over to me at Castel Sant'Angelo, but then didn't come.«*

*»For God's sake! What kind of documents?« Gianna's mother immediately asks.*

*»Mom, I don't know. No one came and the alleged informant never contacted us again. It was probably just some stupid busybody. But it is my job as a journalist to follow up on such clues. You can't know beforehand what will come out.«*

But her father is now also deeply troubled:

*»Gianna, please promise me you'll take care of yourself! I agree with Marco in a way. The people in the Vatican are not all good people. Your mother and I are worried about you! Promise me that you will let me know if this alleged informant contacts you again.«*

*»You don't have to worry about me. I'm old enough to take care of myself.«*

Gianna avoids direct eye contact with her parents. She has just lied to them. It's not true that she hasn't received any more messages from the dubious informant. Yesterday the second mail from him was in her electronic mailbox.

## Luxury problems

Jan Eckert is annoyed by his parents' quarrel. For weeks, it's been about one thing and one thing only. Where are we going to spend our summer vacation this year? Jan's father wants to go to the North Sea. Holland or one of the East Frisian islands. Same procedure as every year. Jan's mother is longing for more southern climes. On the Strada del Sole to Italy, by plane to Mallorca, Gran Canaria, the Maldives. It doesn't matter where, just not to that damn North Sea again!

*»I don't feel like sitting in the vacation rental for two weeks in bad weather again!«*

*»So what? You think there's no bad weather in Italy?«*

*»Yes, I do, but not for weeks at a time, like on your stupid North Sea!«*

*»We've already been to Italy a few times. You do realize how long it takes us to get there by car each time, until we finally arrive in this stupid Rimini? Construction sites without end, traffic jams without end and the Italians can't be topped in toll collection! We throw them our hard-earned money in the throat and they celebrate dolce vita!«*

*»Then we'll just fly again. From Cologne-Bonn we are faster by plane on the Canary Islands, than by car on the North Sea! And it's not much more expensive either. Besides, you keep saying that our money might soon be worth nothing. Then finally stop being stingy on our vacation!«*

Jan has had enough of this eternal back and forth from his parents. He won't be going anyway, no matter what the decision is. Since his 16th birthday, he's been cut off. The topic of a vacation with his parents is over for him.

Half a year ago, his oldies gave him his own car to celebrate his graduation from high school. A small underpowered clunker. But Jan has felt free ever since. Really free! He had gone on vacation with three buddies: They

had camped on Texel for two weeks. Funny - he had often been to the same place with his parents. But somehow, with his friends there, everything was completely different. Much cooler. Until the night when Max puked in the tent, drunk, because he couldn't get the zipper of the exit open in time. In the morning they went home again.

*»Let's fly to Greece! It's supposed to be much cheaper now that we're teaching the Greeks to save money,« Jan's mother starts the discussion again.*

*»Are you crazy? Do you know how badly the Greeks are speaking to us Germans? They blame us for their own mismanagement. Now they want debt relief again. We might be stranded on some Greek island because the air traffic controllers, the port workers or the whole state is on strike again. I wonder how it's all going to end there.«*

*»Then Italy again. After all the world is still all right there.«*

*»You don't have a clue at all! Recently they brought a report about the Italian banks. The shit is already hitting the fan. It's only a matter of time before the next bubble bursts!«*

*»You must know. Where you always know soooo well about financial matters!«*

Jan's mother rolls her eyes. She still hasn't forgiven her husband for the fact that he absolutely had to buy those Lehman securities. Peter and Elvira Eckert had lost twenty thousand euros back then. Money that they had actually already budgeted for their children's studies. Gone overnight. Yet they both had always trusted their money advisor at the savings bank. And from what they heard, he had lost a lot of money himself. But there's a lot of talk in this small town - and often a lot of nonsense.

How could they possibly know anything about banking? Jan's parents had worked their way up from humble beginnings. Peter Eckert had learned to be an electrician at RWE. Over the years, he worked his way up in the company. Today he has a desk job and prepares audits and certifications as

a safety officer. He is now in his mid-fifties and plans to retire at 63. Until then, he has to work hard to pay for his children's studies.

Elvira Eckert had trained as a technical draftswoman. After she had Jan and, three years later, his sister Anna, she stayed at home and took care of the children. Since they are out of the woods, she works part-time at the checkout of the local discount grocery store.

*»If we can't agree, we'll just go on vacation separately this time!«  
Jan's mother suggests. »You go to your North Sea and Anna and I  
will go to Italy.«*

Jan's father doesn't feel like continuing this discussion today. Without a word, he disappears into his hobby cellar and switches on the computer to analyze the current movements on the stock market. But what he sees there does not exactly help to calm him down. Quite the opposite!

## **Remorse**

Around ten o'clock in the project room: David and Klaus apparently have the spacious office to themselves today. The other team members are working in their home offices. On David's Messenger app, everyone is displayed "Available". David also prefers to work at home. Today, however, they need direct access to the bank's computer, which they only have here on site.

After all, it's not a bad place to work. In the tea kitchen there is not only tea, but also coffee as much as you want. It doesn't exactly taste like a good coffee house, but it's quite drinkable and contains enough caffeine for an hour's work. Fresh fruit and various soft drinks are also provided to employees free of charge. In the battle for the best brains, companies are already coming up with quite a few ideas. However, they also expect something in return for these benefits. If you don't perform, you're fired, which of course no one says outright. But David has often seen employees disappear at the end of the quarter because their contracts were not renewed.

*»Hey Klaus, how long did you stay in that club?«*

*»Not so much longer than you. You simply left me behind alone. Then I went with Lissi to her home in the 21st district. A hot chick, I tell you!«*

David would rather not go into more detail today. Instead, he would rather find the error in his software that has been bothering him since this morning. But now he thinks back to the night's excursion with Klaus and the strange hints he had made.

*»Do you remember what you said before this Lissi came into your life?«*

Klaus looks at him questioningly.

*»What do you mean?«*

*»You had said that now you don't want to bake small rolls anymore, you want to get into the really big business, or something like that.«*

*»Nonsense, you don't always have to take everything literally. Besides, you weren't completely sober at that point either.«*

*»I was definitely sober enough that I can remember pretty well. And what you told me there irritated me quite a bit. So out with it! We've known each other long enough. I will keep my mouth shut!«*

Klaus squirms. He could slap himself for talking so much that evening. But since he trusts David, he hesitantly begins to talk:

*»I noticed some strange records while maintaining the database. There are regular transfers to an account that cannot be assigned to a real bank customer. The money was regularly withdrawn from the account in cash shortly after the transfer. The account is managed exclusively online. I looked at the log files and evaluated the IP addresses. And imagine: The access was always from the address space of the municipality. The transfers always follow the same pattern. The amount is between 10,000 and 20,000 Donautaler and in the transfer purpose is always the term*

*'watercleanup'. If you ask me, there is some corrupt pig in the city administration who is diverting massive amounts of money and making a nice life for himself!«*

David has listened carefully and shakes his head.

*»You've come up with a nice theory. Don't you think there could be something else behind it? Why don't you report the incident to your boss? You are even contractually obligated to do so!«*

*»Are you stupid? They'd immediately hang it on me because I'd used account data without authorization. I'd definitely be facing charges right away and lose my job. Besides, I haven't told you everything yet: There is a mobile phone number in the contact data of the account. I called it anonymously. The guy on the line was really irritated when I asked him about the account. He was shitting bricks and asked if I wanted money from him!«*

*»Have you completely lost your mind now? This is blackmail!«*

*»Don't get your knickers in a twist. There's some corrupt swine sitting in the administration and making a nice life for himself out of my taxes, and I'm supposed to sit back and watch him rake in the dough? I'll just teach the guy a lesson and redirect some of the damage, which has already been done anyway, to me in the form of a share.«*

David unmistakably sees the sheer greed in Klaus' eyes. The same look as the other day in the club. Obviously he's hell-bent on doing this crooked thing. David thinks for a moment and then says:

*»Listen! You know my opinion. If you don't dare to press charges, you can do it anonymously. I don't want to have anything to do with this. As far as I'm concerned, this conversation never took place here.«*

He closes his notebook, leaves the room without a word and goes to the kitchenette. Klaus also doesn't have the nerve to work any longer. He lets David go his way and is quite happy that this discussion is over for the time being. Can he really trust David not to say anything else? Probably

so; he is not the type who would break a promise lightly. And somehow he is also involved now.

Klaus is determined to see it through to the end. Basically, it's too late to reconsider it anyway. Tonight the whole thing will happen!

## Confession

Gianna reads the mail for the fourth time now:

*Dear Signorina Marconi,  
Please excuse me very much for having stood you up at the Angel Bridge recently. Unfortunately, I was not able to make our meeting happen as planned without putting both of us in great danger. I sincerely hope that you will give me another opportunity to meet. Please come to the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin next Thursday at 10 o'clock in the morning. I will be waiting for you there in one of the confessionals. I will place a prayer book in front of the confessional so that you can find me more easily.  
With God's blessing.*

What a miserable busybody! Why doesn't the guy write right away what he wants from me? Instead of this secrecy! Gianna would still like to put the e-mail in the electronic wastebasket. In the end, however, her curiosity wins out over her annoyance. At least this church is not as far away from her apartment as the Angel Bridge.

Gianna packs her handbag and carefully locks the apartment door. Maria and Marco are both already at work. It is going to be a beautiful day. The birds are chirping from the balconies and roof terraces. At Piazza Castellana, Gianna reaches the Tiber and crosses it on the Ponte Palatino. From the bridge, she can already make out the striking tower of Santa Maria behind the green trees on the other bank.

When she reaches the church, she sees a group of street boys frolicking in front of the portal. The square and the porch of the church are a popular meeting place. Especially the porch with the "Mouth of Truth" is said to have once been a tourist attraction. Today, at best, a few teenagers prove



that they dare to stick their hand into the hole in the marble slab with the frightening grimace.

Inside the church there is not a soul to be seen. It is dark. A few isolated candles burn at the altar and in the aisles. Gianna walks across the marble floor of the right aisle, past the columns, until she finds the confessional with the book in front of it. Carefully, she picks up the book and places it on one of the nearby chairs.

Should she really go into that wooden cabinet? Who knows what awaits her in there? Gianna has never confessed in her life. When she was a child, she had often accompanied her parents to Sunday church services. She had also taken part in church initiation rites such as communion and confirmation with great joy. But confession? No thanks! Why should she talk to a complete stranger about things that really didn't concern him in the least?

Slowly, Gianna pulls open the creaking wooden door and looks inside the confessional. There really isn't much room inside. A simple wooden chair stands in front of a small kneeler. Above the kneeler is a tightly woven wooden grille that separates the confessor from the clergyman. Gianna enters and closes the door behind her. Now everything around her goes completely dark. Gianna feels a sense of panic rising up inside her. If only she hadn't gotten involved in this madness!

*»Signorina Marconi?« someone whispers from behind the wooden grille.*

*»Yes?« answers Gianna in a quivering voice.*

The pupils of her eyes slowly get used to the darkness. Gianna sees how the grille is slowly folded to the side. Through the now open viewing window, she looks into the friendly face of a young man in a priest's robe.

*»Thank you very much for your trust! I credit you for giving me this second chance.«*

This is not how she had imagined the mail writer. Now - when she is sitting so close to him - something confidence-inspiring emanates from him. If it weren't for his priest outfit, she probably would have even turned around to look at him on the street. Thick black curls frame his angular features. A three-day beard gives him a certain wildness, which, however, is in contradiction to his friendly mouth and the clear look of his dark brown eyes.

*»It's all right,« Gianna replies. »Who am I dealing with? Will you tell me your name?«*

*»My name doesn't matter. It's better if you don't know it. For the sake of simplicity, call me Pietro.«*

*»Whatever Pietro, but please at least tell me what you want from me!«*

*»I have some information that should find its way into the public domain. I hope you can help me with that.«*

*»Why do you need me for that? There have been dozens of leaking platforms on the Internet for decades, where you can commit any kind of secret betrayal you like. You do have Internet access, otherwise you couldn't have contacted me.«*

*»My dear child, I am a priest and not very knowledgeable about these technical things. I was very lucky to get this anonymous email access in the Vatican. However, the operation of this wikithing is beyond my competence. Besides, I am sure that all the data leaving the Vatican for the Internet is accurately logged and evaluated.«*

*»Just like the two mails you wrote to me unencrypted!« Gianna sighs as she shakes her head in bewilderment.*

*»I'm sorry if I got you into trouble there. But as a journalist, I'm sure you get a lot of e-mails every day from all kinds of sources, and I didn't write anything incriminating in those two e-mails.«*

*»Please tell me now what this is all about!«*

Gianna is getting impatient.

*»A confrere of mine works as a secretary in the Vatican Bank under the direction of Monsignor Scarelli. He has found irregularities there in the payment transactions between the Vatican Bank and the Council of the City of Rome.«*

*»What do you mean by irregularities?«*

*»As you may know, every month the Vatican pays a certain amount of money to the City Council for the promotion of social institutions. Old people's homes, military hospitals, day care centers and the like.«*

Gianna nods. Even if the Vatican is a global rich business enterprise, it obviously cannot morally afford to let the suffering city on its doorstep go to the dogs like this. And the city has no choice but to accept these handouts in order to provide its inhabitants with a halfway tolerable existence.

*»I have some documents here that prove that in recent years significant portions of these aid funds have been diverted to certain individuals on the board of the Central Council of the City and thus deprived of their intended purpose.«*

Gianna remembers many an outburst of rage from her flatmate Marco, who likes to rag on the rampant nepotism in the Roman council system. The residents of Trastevere regularly elect their neighborhood councilors, most of whom they know well and trust. If one of these councilors does not live up to the trust placed in him, he can always be replaced by someone else. But what goes on in the central council at the city level is difficult for individual Romans to understand. The central council is elected by the many neighborhood councils, and apparently things are not always done properly.

The priest hands Gianna a bundle of paper through the window of the confessional.

*»I hereby entrust these papers to you. Please see that this injustice is made known and that those in need of assistance in the city are again properly helped.«*

*»And how do you envision that? Should I scan this paper and publish it on my video channel?« Gianna shakes her head again, uncomprehending.*

*»Dear child. I do not expect you to put yourself in danger. But I am sure that you will find a way that justice will eventually prevail in this matter.«*

This pathetic drivel is slowly becoming too much for Gianna.

*»How can I reach you if I have more questions?«*

*The priest hesitates. »I'm afraid you can't do that at all. But I will regularly follow your video blog. Once you report something there about the Bocca della Verità, I'll try to get back to you by e-mail.«*

*»All right, then we'll stay that way. But I can't promise you anything!«*

Gianna carefully folds the papers in half and stows them in her purse. Without another word, she leaves the confessional. For a short time, she remains in the church. In front of the altar, she kneels down in one of the pews and pretends to perform the prayer of repentance she has been instructed to perform. In reality, her thoughts revolve around the conversation with the priest. Should she really let herself be dragged into this?

After two minutes, she gives up her penitential attitude and leaves the church with quick steps. She can hardly wait to get home and take a look at these alleged secret papers.

## **The seriousness of life**

Summer is over and so is the vacation of the Eckert family. Peter and Elvira Eckert had spent two beautiful weeks with their daughter Anna, in

glorious weather, on the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea. The renunciation of the North Sea had been the price for the fact that his wife had not insisted more on Italy. In Peter Eckert's eyes, a good compromise.

Son Jan had stayed at home and had mercilessly exploited the storm-free time with his buddies. Things had gotten pretty rowdy for a few nights. Fortunately, the Eckerts had understanding neighbors. Before his parents returned, Jan and his friends had joined forces to remove all traces of their drinking binge and even cleaned through the entire apartment once.

Even before the summer had really begun, Jan had had to decide, under pressure from his parents, what he wanted to do after he had passed his Abitur. Unfortunately, he was completely undecided and really had no idea what he wanted to do. For a while he thought about a voluntary social year. But his parents were not very enthusiastic about it. Shortly before the application deadline, he enrolled in a business administration course at a university in Cologne and actually received an acceptance letter. Now the semester is about to begin and his parents are once again putting pressure on him:

*»When are you going to start looking for a place in a dorm?«*

*»Ma, I can't get a place there anyway. They have eternally long waiting lists. A friend of mine lives in Cologne in a shared flat and he said that something will probably become available soon.«*

*»And when will that be decided?«*

*»I don't know, but soon! And if not, then I'll drive to Cologne every day by car. It only takes an hour. That's what many people do. Or I'll look for a small apartment somewhere near the university.«*

*Now his father intervenes in the conversation: »An apartment? I think you're dreaming! Do you know what a one-room apartment in Cologne costs in rent every month on the open housing market?«*

*And his mother adds: »It's no wonder with all the foreigners our government had to bring into the country. Now they're all getting apartments from the government, and we Germans can see where we stay!«*

*»Oh Ma, now don't start ranting about the refugees again. Would you prefer we let them drown in the Mediterranean?«*

*»But boy, your mother is right!« Jan's father now intervenes. »We can't fight the misery of the world by granting asylum to all Africans, Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis and so on. Do you have any idea how many are THEM and how many are WE? How many do you want to let come? And what do you say to those who are not allowed to enter? The really poor people in these countries can't afford to come to us because they don't have money to pay the traffickers. Do you think that's fair?«*

*»No, but I still think it's important to help people in need if you are able!«*

*»And what about all the economic refugees? Why did they give their money to the traffickers instead of investing it in their own future back home? They just want to take advantage of our social system without ever having paid anything for it. Your mother and I have paid taxes, pension contributions and health insurance all our lives. And not too scarcely!«*

*»Stop it with your pension contributions and all that crap. The money you paid in was immediately paid out to the pensioners. Or do you think it works like a piggy bank that you feed when you're young and slaughter when you're old? If you are once pensioners, then you are also dependent on the fact that my generation feeds you through, whether you like it or not.«*

*»No, my boy, you're wrong! We have already made sure that we are not on your pocket in old age. And that's precisely why we don't want these strangers to come along now and have a good time at our expense!«*

*»What is foreign to you? Everything that is not German? The Müllers at the end of the street, yes, they are German. They've*

*been living on welfare and Hartz 4 for three generations. But they are more foreign to me than the Sultan from my high school class, who managed to graduate despite his language problems. Or the old man Meier, who always takes pictures of the little boys in the sandbox in the park in the summer? Another good German. I have to finance his pension so that he can always buy the best lens for his camera. Such people are strange to me. They should be deported somewhere where the pepper grows. But unfortunately it is not possible.«*

*»Jan, you're right: not every German is good and not every foreigner is bad. Nevertheless, we can't save the world by bringing all the people who are bad to us. In Africa, every woman has five children on average. You have graduated in mathematics. Just calculate what will happen if we let them all come to us. How many years will it take before we are in the minority? If we don't put a stop to it now, it will soon be too late. And if our government doesn't understand that, then we will elect another government. You'll see!«*

Jan is not in the mood for another discussion with these philistines.

*»Hey guys all right. I'll take care of my place in Cologne soon. First of all, come back down!«*

With these words he leaves his parents and disappears to his room. His old folks are such a pain in the ass sometimes! He puts on his running clothes and leaves the house. As always when Jan is frustrated, a round of running is now called for. Today even the longer round is necessary to clear his head again. He runs at a brisk pace over tarred roads and dusty country lanes until he reaches his parents' house after half an hour, completely exhausted. Before taking a shower, he asks his mother in a conciliatory tone when supper will be.

## **Sewer Rats**

Klaus' heart is pounding up to his head. Now it's getting serious. He has been planning everything down to the last detail for weeks.

He had quickly reached a deal with the anonymous account holder on the phone. Klaus had told him that he would forget the matter in exchange for a payment of 100,000 Danube talers. He gave his word of honor that he would not make any further demands after that. In return, his interlocutor promised that there would be no more concealed transfers in the future. The money transfer was scheduled for around twenty-two o'clock. Klaus instructed him to be near the Hofburg from half past nine, where he would receive further instructions by telephone. He was to bring the money with him in a briefcase.

*»Let's go. Keep a cool head. You've got to get through this now!«  
Klaus tries to reassure himself.*

He parks his new electric runabout near Girardi Park, walks quickly inside and makes sure that no one is following him. He disappears behind a small bush and makes sure once again that no one sees him. Then he lifts the inconspicuous grate to the narrow entrance shaft, climbs in and closes the grate again above his head.

He had already picked the lock on the grille a few days ago with a bolt cutter. For days, he had pored over the plans of the old Viennese sewer system, looking for ways to get in and out unnoticed, until he found what he was looking for here. In the meantime, he knows his way around down here.

Klaus switches off his cell phone. There is no network down here, and that's just as well. He has to squeeze through the narrow air shaft on the ladder for another ten rungs, then he stands in the walled channel. The headlamp on his head bathes the long tube in a cold LED light. With quick steps, he follows the course of the duct. Occasionally, he sees a small black shadow scurry by. Rats! There are thousands of them here! Just keep moving quickly. Klaus feels like a trained rat in a labyrinth. The main and side channels through which he passes are very different from one another: new concrete pipes, old brick tunnels, church-like halls and narrow connecting pipes alternate regularly. The stench down here is sometimes



unbearable. When Klaus was scouting out the optimal route, he had to throw up multiple times. Today, however, he is so excited that he doesn't mind the stench so much anymore.

A few times he has the feeling that someone is following him. But it's only the echo of his footsteps that refracts off the countless walls down here before it finds its way back to his ears. Most of the time, however, the roar of the flowing sewage drowns out any other source of sound anyway.

Just don't step into this flowing broth! Klaus imagines how it must be down here when a heavy downpour brings the canals to the edge of their capacity. Anyone who is down here then dies a disgusting death!

He stops for a moment and thinks shortly. At the two side channels that branch off to the right in front of him, he is not quite sure for a moment which is the right one to his destination. He decides on the second one. After a few meters, however, he knows he is on the right track again. The lantern light shining in from above through the manhole covers forms a recognition pattern for his sense of direction in a certain way. Another fifty meters straight ahead and he has reached his destination.

Klaus reaches the narrow spiral staircase and climbs up on tiptoe, step by step. At the end of the staircase, he finds himself inside an advertising pillar that represents one of the emergency exits from the sewers and is not at all recognizable as such from the outside. The door to the outside is at ground level. Through the small round peephole in the door, he can dimly make out the Viennese Mariensäule.

Klaus looks at his wristwatch. It is now a quarter to ten. He takes a deep breath. Then he switches on his anonymous cell phone, waits briefly for it to log on to the network and presses redial. After a short ring, the familiar voice answers.

*»Hello?«*

*»Yes hello, it's me. Where are you now?«*

*»I am standing in front of the Hofburg, as agreed.«*

*»Listen: you are now going to the Marian column in the square "Am Hof". Do you know where that is?«*

*»Yes, of course.«*

*»It will take you about five minutes to walk. Walk up and down by the Marian column in the middle of the square. I'll call you again!«*

Klaus ends the conversation. His pulse is racing. But he has the feeling that his conversation partner also sounded quite nervous. Serves him right, the wanker! He should have thought before he made long fingers. Now he shall quietly pay for it!

Slowly, his uncertainty gives way and a feeling of euphoria begins to spread through him. So far, everything has gone exactly according to plan. If he keeps cool now and follows through with everything as planned, nothing can go wrong. He takes a look at the door's locking mechanism. It is designed in such a way that the door of the advertising pillar can be opened from the inside at any time. But to prevent the public from getting in, there is only an inconspicuous knob on the outside with a lock underneath. From the outside, the door is difficult to recognize as such.

In his planning, Klaus had assumed that he might be followed after the money was handed over. The stable door mechanism would stop any pursuers for a while. In any case, he would have enough time to make a run for it through the underground labyrinth. And the meter-thick ceilings would also make it impossible to locate him by radio using a transmitter placed in the suitcase.

Klaus goes through the decisive step of the money transfer in his mind one last time. Then he positions himself at the peephole in the door and observes the square in front of St. Mary's Column. He doesn't have to wait long before he sees a darkly dressed man walking across the square, which is deserted at this time of day. He is carrying something in his right hand. The bright lamps of the street lighting cast his long ghostly shadow on the

cobblestones. When he reaches the Marian column, he stops and looks around in all directions.

Klaus reaches for the phone again and starts the crucial call:

*»Hello?«*

*»Hello, I can see you. Now listen carefully to what I say! Turn about 90 degrees to the right - yes just like that. Can you see the advertising pillar at the edge of the square?«*

*»Yes, I see it.«*

*»So, you go straight there now. When you arrive at the column, put the briefcase with the money down there. Then, without turning around, go back to the Marian column, to where you are now standing! Do you understand?«*

*»All right.«*

Klaus switches off the cell phone. Now comes the decisive moment. Through the window, he sees the man coming toward him. The closer he gets, the better Klaus can see him. He is of sturdy build and somewhat stocky. Typical desk jockey, almost as he had imagined him in his fantasy. When he stops in front of the column, he is only a scant meter away from Klaus. And as he bends down to put the briefcase down, Klaus thinks he can hear his breath through the closed door.

Instinctively, Klaus holds his own breath. His heart is pounding up to his throat while he waits, as quiet as a mouse, for the man to disappear again. The man briefly looks around in all directions. Then he turns his back on the advertising pillar and walks away in the direction of the center of the square, as he had been ordered to do.

Klaus waits a moment. Then he opens the door of the pillar, grabs the briefcase and pulls the door firmly shut again. That's it! Now it's time to retreat quickly. Taking two steps at a time, he jumps down the spiral staircase. Then into the sewer pipe and back the way he came. He runs so fast that the rats take to their heels and chase him at a short distance. Only

when he slowly approaches his exit point does he take the time to catch his breath. The first deep breaths, however, bring the beastly stench back to his consciousness. Now it is finally too much for his stomach. He has to retch twice, then vomits in three massive spurts into the flowing brown broth.

After a few minutes, his spirits slowly return. He dries his eyes with his handkerchief and cleans his face in a makeshift manner. He feels relieved in every respect. The last thing to do down here is to repack the money. It could be that the briefcase was equipped with a transmitter that could be his undoing as soon as he reaches the surface of the earth. From his jacket he takes out a folded cloth bag that he has brought for this purpose. He unfolds it and opens the briefcase.

In the light of his headlamp, he can still take a brief look inside the case. However, it is only a very brief look. The strange contents of a leather briefcase are the last thing Klaus Baumann's eyes see in this life. Then, in a fraction of a second, the suitcase turns into a gigantic fireball and Klaus Baumann dies a death that could hardly be quicker or more painless.

An infernal pressure wave spreads throughout the venerable Vienna sewer system. The neighboring tunnel systems collapse and heavy cast-iron manhole covers are hurled up to the roofs of houses. Directly above the detonation site at the Operngasse, a horse-drawn carriage is hurled into the air and lands in the gaping crater the bomb has torn in the street. The coachman is killed instantly, the horse is put out of its misery after an hour by a veterinarian. The tourist couple in the carriage miraculously survives with minor injuries.

The next day, the Kronen newspaper will headline:

*Suicide attack in the Vienna sewers! Do the Islamists want to let us suffocate in our shit?*

## **Conspiracy**

Boris Luganov had once again completed an order to the complete satisfaction of his clients. The production of the bomb had been his work and he had delivered a masterpiece.

Two weeks ago, the organization had contacted him on the Darknet to enlist his services again. This time, the assignment was to track down and eliminate a blackmailer. He immediately traveled to Vienna to clarify the details and make all the necessary preparations.

The organization had done a good preliminary job. Contact with the blackmailer had already been established. He had fallen for one of the telephone honeypots that the organization had laid out in its extensive black money network. An analysis of the perpetrator's profile showed that he must be a naïve young man with an excessive need for recognition.

Several alternative courses of action were discussed in the organization's management circle. Ultimately, to minimize the risk, it was decided and ordered to kill the extortionist and simultaneously destroy all evidence.

Boris Luganov was permanently involved in communication with the blackmailer as a consultant after his arrival in Vienna. His contact to the organization was the same person as the blackmailer's contact. The construction of the bomb case was over in a week. Boris Luganov is known in the scene as an explosives expert and has often been booked in similar situations. The effect of the explosives he uses is considered unique. He has good contacts with former secret service agents. This enables him to build suitcase bombs with a detonation force that would have required a whole car of explosives in the past.

After the procedure of the fictitious money transfer was clarified with the blackmailer, Boris Luganov only had to equip the bomb case with a suitable ignition device. His contact wanted to arm the bomb only at the last moment of the handover. Probably to minimize his own risk in case the blackmailer would force him to open the suitcase.

Boris Luganov had also been present as an invisible third man during the money transfer. Not even a hundred meters behind his contact, he had observed the money delivery and had armed the bomb by radio at the exact moment when the blackmailer had taken the briefcase.

When the detonation of the bomb shook the city center, Boris Luganov was already sitting in the cab to the airport. At the departure terminal, he was still able to follow the breaking news about the attack at the Vienna Opera. His return flight to the Neva domain was on schedule.

## **Leakage points**

At home in her flatmate's room, Gianna pores over the papers that the mysterious priest had given her in the confessional. It is apparently a list of money orders with amounts and names of the respective money recipients. Gianna feels the need to talk to someone. Marco and Maria are out of the game. Especially since Marco, the old chatterbox, will certainly not be able to keep his mouth shut again. The next one who comes to her mind is her father. She could talk to him about everything, but he would probably worry again and possibly pass on his knowledge to Gianna's mother. After that, she would be under constant surveillance by her parents.

Gianna decides to let Salvatore in on the affair. She had already spoken to him about the failed meeting at Castel Sant'Angelo. So he already knows a little bit about it. Gianna opens her computer and sends him a chat message:

*»Ciao Salvatore, are you there?«*

It takes about a minute, then his answer appears on the screen:

*»What's up?«*

*»Are you at home? I need to talk to you!«*

*»Whatever. Had a long night. Just got up. Come by in fifteen minutes.«*

*»Ok, see you.«*

Salvatore is in a similarly precarious situation as Gianna. He has successfully completed his journalism training, but cannot make a living from this profession. That's why he works part-time as a driver for the municipal food department. He uses an old diesel truck to transport food from the surrounding countryside to the city, where it is first distributed in the wholesale market hall and then offered for sale at local markets. Sometimes his journeys take him as far as Apulia. The return trips then always become a particular test of patience, because of the many domain borders to be passed. Due to the particular topology of the Apennines, with its many small watercourses that after only a short way pour into the Adriatic or the Tyrrhenian Sea, there are a disproportionate number of them. And at each domain border there are customs formalities to be completed and customs officers to be bribed.

Gianna needs just five minutes to get to the old house where Salvatore also lives in a shared flat.

*»Buongiorno Salvatore, you look tired!«*

*»I am. I was out all night with the truck. What's so urgent?«*

*»Remember I told you about that conspiratorial meeting at Castel Sant'Angelo, which then didn't happen?«*

*»Yes, I remember.«*

*»This morning I met with the guy in the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. In a confessional. This guy is a real priest!«*

*»You're going to confession?« Salvatore looks at Gianna, stunned.*

*»No, nonsense. He called me into this confessional so that no one would see that he was meeting with me. He then told me that a colleague of his, or an acquaintance, or whatever you say there, works in the Vatican Bank and has come across a bribery scandal there.«*

*»It's nothing special there, really,« Salvatore laughs, alluding to the many scandals in the Vatican Bank's history in the days before the big crash.*

*»He has given me documents from which it can allegedly be seen that aid money that was actually intended for social projects of the city of Rome has been diverted to members of the city's Central Council.«*

Salvatore whistles through his teeth.

*»That sounds like a pretty hot number!« he says. »Did you bring those papers?«*

Gianna pulls the papers out of her purse and together they spread them out on Salvatore's desk. After studying them for a while, shaking his head more and more, he says:

*»I think this is very explosive information. I'm sure some people would do anything to keep that from getting out to the public!«*

*»Can we address this on our video blog? Once the information is out, not so much can happen to us,« Gianna asks cautiously.*

*»Are you crazy? This puts us between the fronts of several warring parties and we are certainly the first to be killed. Those who know about such things are no longer safe in this city. Believe me!«*

*»I have a bad feeling about it, too. But we're journalists and can't keep quiet about something like that.«*

*»Why hasn't the priest leaked these documents? He seems to have internet access after all!«*

*»He told me he didn't know anything about it, and from the looks of him, I'll take his word for it. Besides, he's afraid that all traffic from the Vatican will be monitored and he'd be exposed.«*

*»And who guarantees us the authenticity of the documents? Maybe he's just trying to piss someone off.«*



*»The aforementioned gentlemen from the Central Council have often been accused of doing crooked business. One could prove them only so far never what.«*

Gianna and Salvatore look at each other for a while, perplexed. Then Salvatore begins to think out loud:

*»I know a journalist at the newspaper La Città. He has been investigating the allegations of corruption against the board of the Central Council for a long time. If I send him the documents, he'll finally get the evidence he's been lacking. He is also known for never revealing his sources. I think we can trust him. If the newspaper printed it, we can still report it on our blog without anyone getting suspicious.«*

Gianna looks at Salvatore thoughtfully. Then she says:

*»I think that's a good idea. That's how we do it!«*

*»Any other questions?« Salvatore looks at her with a mischievous smile.*

*»No, why?« Gianna asks, a little taken aback.*

*»Well, I just mean. I'm off the clock here until tonight and my bed is still warm!«*

Ah, that's where the wind blows from. Gianna knows that Salvatore is an incorrigible Casanova. But how he sits there with his innocent face in his pajamas in front of her and waits for an answer: A picture for gods! Gianna grins at him for a while and lets him wait for her reaction. Then she slowly pulls his T-shirt over his head and the two disappear under the white bedspread.

## **Student Life**

It has become winter in Cologne. Jan Eckert is now enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in business administration. Finding an apartment was not as easy as he had originally thought. His friend had tried to get him a room in his shared apartment, but Jan didn't had a chance against the

competition at the casting. The room had gone to a pretty medical student from a higher semester.

For the first few weeks, Jan had actually driven with his car to the lectures every day. But the endless driving had annoyed him so much that he had started looking for a place to live more intensively. With a lot of luck, he had been able to get hold of a place in a four-person shared flat via a notice on the university notice board. The apartment was in an unadorned post-war building near Barbarossaplatz. Five rooms, kitchen, bathroom. Jan's room faces the backyard. It is dark but quiet. The room rent is okay and is paid directly by his parents.

Of his three roommates, only one is a student: Patrick is also studying business administration, but already at a master's level and at a different university than Jan. Elena comes from Spain and works as a nurse at the university hospital. Jan rarely gets to see her because she often works the night shift. Georgios is Greek and studied computer science. He has been in Cologne for two years and is the oldest person in the flat. He works in the IT department of an insurance company. Jan has no idea what he is doing and he is not really interested in it. Basically, everyone in the flat-sharing community does his own thing. Now and then they cook together on the weekend or go out partying.

Jan's parents also visited a few times in the beginning. They probably wanted to make sure that their son was doing well in his new environment - all alone and so far from home. Jan's mother, in particular, is finding the transition difficult.

*»You can bring me your laundry once in a while. Or come over for dinner with your nice roommate sometime!«*

Jan's mother just doesn't want to get it that he doesn't care about women. His little sister knows it, his father suspects it, but his mother ignores all his hints. It's as if he's still going through puberty and everything will eventually play out. "Mothers probably have to be like that", Jan thinks. At

any rate, after every check-up visit from his parents, he was glad when they were gone again. He simply finds them embarrassing.

*»Don't you like your parents?« Georgios asks during dinner.*

*»Yes, I do, why do you ask?« Jan replies surprised.*

*»Well, I feel like you hide them from us every time they come to visit you.«*

*»Oh nonsense, they just wanted to drop by because they just had some business in Cologne.«*

*Elena says, »I would be happy if my parents could come and visit me. I haven't been able to see them for a very long time and I miss them so much.«*

*»Then invite them to come to Germany!« Jan says rather flippantly.*

*Georgios responds stropily: »In Greece, family is also very important to us. My parents are now sitting alone at home in Thessaloniki because my brother and I were forced to leave home. We can only see each other once a year, and I think that's a great pity.«*

*»Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. I realize that your situation is not easy. But my parents are really annoying sometimes.«*

Georgios is often homesick for Greece. Even if he is aware that the distance to his homeland transfigures some things. Before his decision to go to Germany, living together in his parents' house had not always been without conflict. His father had been unemployed for years. His mother had never gone to work in her life, but had only been there for the family. When the sons were unable to find work after graduation, there were often unpleasant scenes among the three men. And when Georgios decided to go to Germany, his father did not speak to him for a week.

*»To these Nazis, of all people, who got us into this whole mess with their austerity dictates!«*

Elena's experience in Spain had been even worse. First, her father and mother, who had worked in the same company, became unemployed at the same time. Then, in the course of the Spanish real estate crisis, the family lost their newly built house to the bank. With her parents and sister, Elena then regularly went to the rallies of the Podemos movement. Together with hundreds of other fated people, they had waved their purple flags there and shouted their protest loudly at the established politicians. This had undoubtedly made a positive contribution to strengthening their own egos. However, it did not change her situation. Elena, who had earned a master's degree in psychology in Madrid, was faced with the choice of destitution in her home country or a low-paid nursing job in faraway Germany after two years of unsuccessful job hunting. Now she shares an apartment with two spoiled German business students, has to work shifts and change bandages. This is not how she had imagined her life would be.

## Interrogation

It is late afternoon in Vienna. Thomas Prenninger had called the entire project team to a meeting at the central bank's main administration building at short notice. Attendance was mandatory for everyone. David and the rest of the team are almost all present. Only Klaus is missing and, of course, the project manager Thomas Prenninger, who, as always, is the last to arrive.

*»Does anyone have any idea what he wants from us?«*

*»I don't think anything good,« says Lukas Raderer, one of the software testers on the team. »Normally, at such last-minute meetings, you are informed that the project has been discontinued.«*

At this moment, Thomas Prenninger enters the room. The rings under his eyes testify to a massive lack of sleep.

*»Guys I'll keep it short. You probably have heard about the terrorist attack three days ago. The Domain Prosecutor's Office has now taken over the investigation. I was informed this morning*

*by my superiors that they have now succeeded in identifying the perpetrator on the basis of DNA traces at the scene of the crime. It is allegedly our colleague Klaus Baumann.«*

You could hear a pin drop in the room now. The colleagues look at each other in amazement and disbelief. Klaus Baumann, the opera bomber from the Vienna sewers? That's just bullshit!

*»They apparently found his car near the scene of the crime. He has disappeared without a trace since the time of the crime. A DNA match of body remains at the crime scene and the toothbrush in his apartment showed a hundred percent match. A mistake has reportedly been ruled out.«*

*»Why would Klaus do something like that? That doesn't make any sense at all?« sobs Tanja Hofbauer, a colleague from the documentation department.*

David can't even think straight yet. The shock of the news of the death of his friend and colleague has paralyzed him. Only slowly does he manage to put his thoughts in order. He remembers that he has not been able to reach Klaus in the past few days. Actually, he had wanted to discuss two technical questions with him.

The more he thinks, the more his thoughts circle around the last conversation with Klaus in the project office. His death must have had something to do with the insinuations he had made. He had obviously been on the verge of blackmailing someone. But how could it end like this? David thought about if and whom he should let in on what he knew. He had promised Klaus not to talk about it with anyone. But Klaus was dead now. What should he do?

*Thomas Prenninger continues: »A special commission of the public prosecutor's office is currently busy illuminating the entire personal and professional environment of Klaus Baumann. They will also have a brief initial conversation with each of us. Be prepared for more talks to follow. As you know, this topic is currently very high on the public agenda. The investigators are*

*under enormous pressure to deliver results quickly and pass on this pressure accordingly!«*

Well, it's going to be a long evening! Even if every colleague only had to answer questions for half an hour, the last one would probably not get out until after midnight.

*»The investigators are currently talking to my superiors,« says Thomas Prenninger, explaining the next steps. »In the process, they will also draw up a schedule for the individual interviews. As long as it's not your turn, you can do whatever you want. So hang out in the city, go home or whatever else you're up to. Of course, you guys are also allowed to work.«*

With this last sentence, the project manager seems to have found his strange humor again. David, on the other hand, sees and hears almost nothing of what is happening around him. He tries to make sense of what has happened to Klaus in the past weeks. Didn't he think he was on the trail of some small corruption scandal? Had Klaus lied to him? Had he led a double life and deliberately put him on a false trail to distract him from his true intentions? All completely nonsensical and improbable. Klaus must have gotten involved in something, the dimension of which he had completely misjudged and which had ultimately been his undoing.

David tries to come up with several hypotheses and discards them just as quickly as he constructs them. The wild discussion that has broken out between his colleagues and Thomas Prenninger passes him by. He is only pulled out of his thoughts again when a young good-looking woman and a somewhat older man enter the room.

*»Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Johann Seeleitner - Kriminalhauptkommissar - and this is my colleague Ms. Oberinspektor Harbacher. We would like to ask you a few questions. You are not obliged to talk to us today. But I would like to point out to you that you are obliged to provide information. In case of refusal on your part, judicial coercive measures will be obtained. Your employer has released you from any duty of confidentiality insofar as your knowledge is related to this case.*

*In addition, your employer has expressed his expectation that you will cooperate in every respect.«*

With every word that this arrogant commissioner utters, he becomes less likeable to David. Hopefully he won't be the first candidate in this interrogation marathon. He would like to have a little time to disentangle the chaos of thoughts in his head and come up with a sensible strategy. Unfortunately, he is not granted this wish. The investigators have Thomas Prenninger in first place on their list; in his role as direct supervisor and project manager. And right after that, David's name is on the paper.

The interview with Thomas lasts more than an hour. David waits the first half hour together with a few colleagues in the cafeteria and then goes outside the meeting room where the interviews take place. After the interview with Thomas Prenninger is finally over, he is kindly invited in by the young inspector.

*»Hello Mr. - Jonas,« the commissioner greets him without lifting his eyes from the list of names. »Please sit down!«*

David takes a seat in the chair in front of the desk behind which the two special investigators have positioned themselves against him.

*»I would like to inform you that this interview is being recorded with audio and video in accordance with Section 23 of the Counter-Terrorism Act.«*

*Meanwhile, his colleague points the small camera of her notebook at him and starts recording.*

*»Mr. Jonas, we have heard that you worked closely with Mr. Baumann. Can you explain what might have prompted him to do this?«*

*»I'm sorry, Inspector, I can't explain it at all.«*

*»Chief Inspector - that's how much time there has to be. When was the last time you saw Mr. Baumann?«*

*»That must have been three days ago. We were working in the same room. But we were dealing with different issues, so we didn't talk much.«*

*»Didn't you notice anything about Mr. Baumann? After all, that was the same day that he then committed the bombing at night!«*

*»No, I didn't notice anything. As I said, we spoke little to each other because we had a lot to do. But Klaus behaved as usual. There was nothing that would have indicated such an act.«*

*»Mr. Jonas, according to our records, your name at birth was Daoud Al-Sayed. Can you explain that to us?«*

David's breath caught in his throat. How did the police know? Were they already targeting him as an accomplice? Why had they rummaged around in his past?

*»My parents are originally from Syria. They had to flee their homeland many years ago together with my grandparents. My parents and grandparents settled in what was then Germany. My father applied for a change of our Arabic family name before I was born. Since then, our name has been Jonas. When I was born, he gave me the name Daoud - which was my grandfather's name. When my grandfather died, he had Daoud changed to David.«*

*»Why did he do this?«*

*»Probably to make it easier for me to integrate into society. At that time, as you probably know, refugees were not welcome in Europe. He didn't want me to have any disadvantages because of my name.«*

*»Do you belong to the Islamic religious community?«*

*»I don't belong to any religious community at all.«*

*»But surely your parents and grandparents are devout Muslims!«*



*»My grandparents lived by the rules of the Koran all their lives. My parents also grew up in a religious environment, but turned away from Islam in the years after they fled.«*

*»Can you imagine that your colleague Baumann has become an radicalized Islamist in recent years?«*

David can't help laughing.

*»Klaus an Islamist? He came from the sub-domain Loischach. Isar. Danube. The people there are more Catholic than the Pope! But he had nothing whatsoever to do with religion. The only thing he believed in was his salary transfer at the end of the month.«*

*»Have you ever talked to him about religious matters? What reason do you think he could have had for committing this act? Surely he must have believed in something, or at least in life after death.«*

*»No, I already told you that I have no connection to any religion and Klaus didn't either. If Klaus really died in that explosion, then it was an accident.«*

David cannot see in the commissioner's eyes whether he has convinced him with his statement. Should he continue to pursue his crude theories and suspect Klaus' death to be the suicide bombing of a religiously motivated zealot. David is now sure that he will not pass on his knowledge about Klaus' plans to this idiot. He owes that to his dead friend.

## **Freedom of the press**

Salvatore enjoys the warm wind blowing in his face. He persuaded Gianna to lend him her Vespa. Now he is on his way to the editorial building of the newspaper La Città in Via Cristoforo Colombo. Salvatore loves riding motorcycles. As soon as his finances allow him to do so, he will buy one himself. But then it will be a real racing bike and not some lame girl's swing!

He just turns into Via del Circo Massimo and turns the throttle to the stop. The little engine howls and does its best. To his left, the greenery of the Circus Maximus flies by. In ancient times, charioteers probably felt like he does now. Salvatore closes his eyes briefly and imagines he is Ben Hur.

Just a little further and the next ancient Roman remains can be seen: The imposing ruins of the Caldarium of the Baths of Caracalla. Since no tourists visit Rome any more, they lie dormant again, as they have so often in their long history. Salvatore swears to visit the ancient sites more often in the future. Or he could join one of the citizens' initiatives that have taken up the cause of saving the ancient ruins from decay.

A few more hundred meters and he can turn onto the wide Via Cristoforo Colombo. As he crosses the old railroad bridge, he sees the track bed of the former Ostiense station lying beneath him. This sight fascinates him anew every time. The entire area has been almost completely reclaimed by nature. Where once one train after another rattled by, everything is now quiet and green. Bushes and shrubs everywhere and now and then even mature trees. Railroad service was discontinued during the economic collapse and never resumed thereafter. It had not taken five years for the entire rail network to be dismantled by scrap collectors and melted down into items for daily use. All passenger and freight traffic now runs by road. The jungle in the old track bed now serves as a shelter for all kinds of shady characters and after sunset you should not be there if you love life.

Beyond the bridge, it's not far to Salvatore's destination. In the shade of the old pine trees, he revs up the Vespa one last time. Then he parks his vehicle in front of the newspaper's editorial building. Gianna had impressed upon him several times that he should chain it up well and not rely on the steering wheel lock under any circumstances. Salvatore raises up the seat and takes out the envelope with the secret documents from the helmet compartment, as well as a thick chain to lock the Vespa. He does as he was told and chains the rear wheel to a traffic sign.

Salvatore takes off his sunglasses and enters the large cube-shaped office building. At the end of the foyer is a massive counter. The man behind it appears to be the doorman.

*»Good afternoon, my name is Salvatore Pollini. I have an appointment with Signore Manzoni, Guiseppe Manzoni.«*

The doorman asks to see his ID and then grumpily reaches for the phone.

*»Signore Manzoni? You have a visitor. A Salvatore Pollini says he has made an appointment with you - All right. Would you please pick him up at the reception desk?«*

The doorman asks Salvatore to take a seat in one of the chairs. While he waits, he lets his gaze roam through the large foyer. So this is where La Repubblica used to be made. Long, long ago. Then, like so many office buildings in the city, the building stood empty endlessly. Until La Città moved into the old editorial offices and successfully continued the old traditions. Today, it can claim to be the most influential print and online medium in the city.

Guiseppe Manzoni is probably as old as the building in which he works here. Salvatore met him years ago when he was a lecturer at the journalism school and became friends with him despite the big age difference.

Guiseppe had already worked here as a young volunteer when La Repubblica still existed. As a result, he is often jokingly referred to as "the dinosaur" by his colleagues. When he enters the foyer and sees Salvatore, he greets him with a firm handshake.

*»Salve, Salvatore! How are you, how are you?«*

*»Ciao Beppe! Long time no see!«*

*Guiseppe leads him past the doorman into the stairwell. They climb three floors and reach the corridor where Guiseppe has his office.*

*»Come in and sit down! I have the office to myself today. We can talk in peace. My colleague is out all day today. Can I offer you a cigarette?«*

*»I don't smoke anymore,« Salvatore declines with thanks. »Are you allowed to smoke in here?«*

*»Sure. As long as both in the office agree, why not? The new times have brought us a few good things, after all. When I used to work here for Repubblica, we always had to leave the house to smoke. Absolutely no smoking! You can't imagine how regimented it all was.«*

*»Yes, I've heard that from many quarters. Supposedly, you also had to wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle in the past. Is that true?«*

*»Yes, of course. It saved a lot of people's lives. But you didn't come to ask me about the Stone Age, did you? What interesting things have you found out?«*

Salvatore tells Guiseppe the whole story, just as Gianna had told it to him, but without mentioning her name. Then he shows him the documents he brought with him. Guiseppe studies them for a while. Then he says:

*»If these documents are real, then some gentlemen in the city leadership can get ready for something!«*

*»Are you going to publish the documents?« Salvatore asks curiously.*

*»I can't promise you that at the moment. We will discuss this in the editorial office and my department head will have the final say. All I can tell you is that I will personally do my best to make sure that this mess goes public.«*

*»You have to promise me that no one will find out how you got these documents!«*

*»You got it. You know me. For me, the protection of my sources has top priority. You can count on me!«*

Salvatore has a good feeling. He realizes how much he regards Guiseppe as his personal role model. To do clean journalistic work and at the same time have a permanent position at a renowned paper. Unfortunately, such

jobs are scarce and many of Salvatore's young colleagues dream the same dream. Porca miseria!

Guiseppe asks Salvatore about his other professional and private activities. After they have talked for an hour about God and the world, they say goodbye to each other again. Guiseppe takes Salvatore to the foyer.

When Salvatore steps back onto the road, his first worried glance is at Gianna's scooter. Thank God, everything is okay! He loosens the chain and stows it back in the helmet compartment. Then he pushes the Vespa off the stand, switches on the ignition, presses the start button and off he goes at full throttle back to Trastevere the same way he came. Gianna is probably already waiting at home for him and the good piece.

## **Day X**

It had been quite a stressful week at the university. Jan Eckert had been writing the last pages of his seminar paper and was almost ready to hand it in. Then the storm hit Europe and the rest of the world. For weeks, the finance ministers of the European Union had been meeting regularly and holding crisis talks. Then it became known that two of the world's largest banking institutions had run into difficulties and could no longer meet their obligations. When the first press reports reached the agencies there was only one direction for all share prices on the stock exchanges: a free fall to the bottom.

As Jan clicks through the latest financial news on Friday evening, his smartphone suddenly rings and his father's picture appears on the display.

*»Hi Dad, what's up?«*

*»Hello Jan. I need your advice! What is actually going on out there right now?«*

*»You mean the financial markets? They're going down again right now. Why?«*

*»Don't ask such stupid questions. You know that we have invested a lot of money in stocks. When I look at the current prices, they're now worth half what they were last week!«*

*»Dad, that's the way it is in the stock market. Sometimes it goes up and sometimes it goes down. At the moment, it's just going down massively.«*

*»Your mother is giving me hell, though. After all, that's where our savings are, and they're starting to vanish into thin air. I had also set some extra stop-loss orders with my online broker to be prepared for such cases. But now they tell me that the trading of shares has been suspended and the orders unfortunately could not be executed. Surely this is fraud!«*

*»But it's not your broker's fault that he can no longer execute your orders. I'm sure it's also written somewhere in small print in the General Terms and Conditions that in such cases the broker is not obliged to pay any compensation. I would bet on it.«*

*»What am I supposed to do now. At the moment, after all, it is apparently still completely unclear when the exchanges will resume business.«*

*»What advice do you want me to give you? Wait and see. When the stock markets open up again, you can take a look at the prices and then decide whether you want to sell your shares or not. But I wouldn't recommend it to you!«*

*»Why not?«*

*»Well, because when there's a panic like that, everyone always wants to sell, and that lowers prices even more. That would be the best time to buy. That's what the professionals do. Don't sell!«*

*»Tell that to your mother! She's completely freaked out at the moment and wants us to get rid of the stuff as quickly as possible. What do your professors think about the current situation? They should be well versed in the financial world!«*

*»Oh, everyone has his own view of things. Some have been talking for years about nothing other than the fact that such a massive course correction is long overdue and that this is just the beginning. Others are much more optimistic and see it as part of the natural fluctuations in economic cycles. They're all just cooking with water, too, and can't look into the future with a crystal ball.«*

*»You seem to be quite relaxed about it all. But you do realize that we're talking about real money here, which you have or no longer have. And if our money goes down the drain, how are we supposed to finance your studies in the long run? You're acting as if none of this concerns you. But it very much does!«*

*»Oh Dad, calm down now. As long as you don't sell any of your shares, you won't make a loss. At the moment, they're all virtual losses anyway. Only when you sell your shares will you lose real money. So stay relaxed! You can't do anything else right now anyway.«*

*»Well, thank you very much! I will pass this on to your mother. Let's see if she accepts it. After all, it's the advice of the business student. I wish you a good night. Sleep well!«*

## **Search for traces**

David has been racking his brains for a week now. Why did his friend and colleague Klaus Baumann have to lose his life? For a week, nothing but theories and fantasies. All without result.

But under the shower this morning, he suddenly remembers the memory stick! Klaus had given him this stick with two requirement specifications shortly before his death, which David wanted to look at in the home office. He had taken the USB device home with him and had not bothered with it since then. As if stung by a tarantula, David jumps out of the shower cubicle, dries himself off and rushes to his desk. Sure enough, there's the little black stick in the drawer.

David boots up his computer, inserts the stick and looks intently at the file manager display. Two files in PDF format, both about one megabyte in size. Otherwise, the stick is empty: almost 512 gigabytes of free space.

*»That was to be expected. But maybe there's more!«*

David starts one of his data recovery programs. How many times had he had to conjure up files again that an unwary user had accidentally deleted? How often had he hit a wall with unteachable users:

*»Guys make backups!« - »Yeah, sure, we will.«*

And then David had to move in again and again when some idiot found out that his most important document was gone and the backup copy was stupidly out of date.

David starts the recovery function for the memory stick. As the progress bar grows, so does the list of recovered files. David grins. Even an IT professional like Klaus was sometimes so careless and didn't consistently reformat his disks. He must have known that the deleted files could be recovered.

It doesn't take ten minutes, then the program has run through and David is looking at a seemingly endless list of files.

*»So far so good. But it's going to be a search for a needle in a haystack. Let's see if we can get some more structure in there!«*

Now his professional program can show what it's made of. A few mouse clicks and the confusing list begins to transform into a tree-like structure in which David can elegantly navigate through the various files. He sorts out pictures and videos right at the beginning. Klaus would rather take the knowledge of what has found its way onto this stick to his grave. What interests David is a large text file that had apparently been deleted only recently. He tries to open it, but discovers that it is password-protected.

*»Shit, if I don't get the password out, this place is screwed!«*



David knew Klaus far too well to believe that he had made a careless mistake. He always worked with secure encryption methods. Nothing works without the right password here!

*»I guess we'll have to bring out the heavier guns!«*

David searches his computer for a suitable program. He finds what he is looking for in the "Hackertools" folder. He starts a brute force cracker and lets it loose on the encrypted file. Very slowly, a progress bar begins to appear.

*»So, this will probably take a while now to try through all the possible terms from the relevant dictionaries.«*

David leaves the computer to its fate. He gets dressed, eats a bowl of cereal and drives to work in his electric car. When he gets home in the evening, the computer should be done with his millions of tried password entries!

## **Thunderclouds**

Monsignor Scarelli is raging. Rarely have the assembled department heads of the Vatican Bank seen their boss so agitated and unruly as today. In a very terse Outlook invitation, Monsignor's private secretary had summoned them to the tap-proof meeting room of the Apostolic Palace for ten o'clock. The acoustic noise generator, which is supposed to additionally protect the small room against unauthorized eavesdropping, is running at full speed. However, at the volume at which the monsignor utters his rants, it could just as well be switched off again.

*»I want this leak finally found and eliminated! This is now the third time that secret documents from the bank have found their way out. Gentlemen, I am telling you for the very last time: if you are not able to guarantee the reliability of your employees, then I am forced to give the management of your departments into other hands!«*

Furious and with a red head that barely contrasts with the purple of his official attire, he slams a bundle of papers onto the meeting table carved out of fine mahogany wood.

*»How in God's name did those papers get out?«*

Like reprimanded altar boys, the scolded department heads cast furtive glances at the individual pages as they are passed around. In a low voice, someone suspects:

*»These are transfer slips to certain members of the Central Council of the City of Rome.«*

*»I can see that myself, you moron! I didn't ask what it was, but how it could leave the walls of the Vatican! Just do not think that I am happy that we have to buy the goodwill of the council leadership with money. I would also prefer it if we could confine ourselves to our Christian mission and give our aid money to those who need it most. However, as you know, the law of the jungle prevails out there! Without the favor of the chiefs, we can unfortunately not assert our interests! Our God in heaven has given us this difficult task: To be a lighthouse of faith in the middle of the desert.«*

Those gathered were already hoping that the end of the lecture had been reached and that the monsignor would now begin the pathetic part of his speech. But then he started ranting again at the top of his voice:

*»And I will send all of you, as you are gathered here, to this desert if you prove unworthy of your task! Do not think that this is an empty threat! What do you propose? I want to hear from you now concrete proposals on how we are going to solve this problem!«*

The department head responsible for the black coffers first looks hesitantly around the table and then asks cautiously:

*»Are these the originals of the incriminating documents, then?«*

*»No, one of the councilors made copies of them and gave them to us. He himself got the originals from our man at the newspaper*

*La Città. The latter was just able to prevent these papers from reaching the public. Can't imagine what would have happened if this had found its way into the newspaper edition!«*

*»Monsignor, it is imperative that we get the originals. If these papers have been printed at the Vatican, then we can determine which printer they came from. All our printers are prepared accordingly and print inconspicuous yellow dots on the paper, in which the respective MIC<sup>3</sup> is contained. Through the list of stored print jobs, we then get to the person who did the printing or copying.«*

Monsignor Scarelli's facial expression begins to relax somewhat. His frown lines on his forehead slowly give way to a devilish smile, which gently frames his mouth.

*»Very good! I will see to it that we get the originals immediately. I expect all of you to find the guilty person and make an example of him. Every little traitor here, shall know from the beginning what will happen to him if he dares to betray the Holy Catholic Church in such a way!«*

*»Should we hire Bruno?«*

*»I will think about that. We've had good experiences lately with an external consultant from the Neva domain. I think Bruno is certainly a good man to do a few unavoidable jobs here in Rome. But this Luganov from the former Russia is in a different league. He will soon be here in the Vatican for a few days anyway. Maybe he can take care of that right then.«*

The assembled department heads get weak in the knees. Thank God they are sitting firmly on their antique damask chairs. Each of them knows that Scarelli is willing to kill if it serves his personal interests. But the fact that he now has professional killers flown in from abroad is too much even for these hardened careerists in the service of the Lord.

## Bank Run

For a week, stock exchanges around the world remained closed. There was only one topic on all television channels: the current financial crisis.

Whenever Jan Eckert turned on the TV, someone was being interviewed about his assessment of the current situation. Three different patterns emerged in the reporting:

- Pattern 1: High-ranking government representatives assured the public with a chest-tone of conviction that there was no reason at all for citizens to worry. They said that deposits were safe, at least within the limits of the maximum amounts guaranteed by law, which, however, had been set so high by the legislature that only the rich would have to reckon with real capital losses. The states of the European Union and the European Central Bank would join forces to initiate all measures necessary to successfully overcome this crisis. Of course, all citizens would now also have a duty to do their part to stabilize this, admittedly difficult, situation by contributing to the de-escalation of the situation with prudence and confidence in the ongoing measures.
- Pattern 2: So-called experts analyzed the background and causes of the current situation. Interestingly, all these experts were largely in agreement that the events of the past few weeks were predictable and caused by a misguided monetary policy in previous years. However, there was no agreement on what concrete measures should be taken now to successfully defuse the situation. When asked for concrete advice on what the affected citizen should best do now, the answer rarely deviated from the advice in pattern 1. The few experts who had the courage to stand out a little from the mainstream opinion with alternative suggestions were immediately banned from the public television channels.
- Pattern 3: The great hour of the doomsday prophets arrived. At last, all those experts who had been warning of the inevitability of this

crash for years were able to speak out in front of a large audience. Terms such as fiat money, gold backing and the miracle of compound interest reached the living rooms of the general population for the first time via the private television stations. Access to the public broadcasters remained denied to many of these dazzling personalities, but they were finally able to reach millions of people via private television, something they had never managed to do before with their YouTube channels and websites.

In the evening, Jan talks with Patrick, his roommate and eighth-semester business student, about the day's events.

*»Did you see the lines of people in front of the banks?« asks Jan.*

*»Yes, I did!«*

*»Our professor said in the lecture today that if people lose confidence in our monetary system, the banks will go down the drain!«*

*»I think so too. Today, one of our professors skipped the actual lecture topic and discussed the current situation on the financial markets with us. Do you know what he believes?«*

*»No, go ahead and tell me!«*

*»He sees a huge bubble about to burst, and that is derivatives trading.«*

*»Oh dear, I've never really understood that. I don't think we'll have it on the syllabus until the next few semesters,« Jan groans.*

*»Well, in principle it's quite simple to understand. People bet on something. Basically, it doesn't matter what. The future price of wheat, oil, stocks, coconuts, it really doesn't matter at all. Anyway, the professor said that in the last decades huge amounts of capital have flowed into such derivative transactions, which all keep each other alive. That means A bets on a rising price, B on a falling price. If A is right, he gets money from B and vice versa in exactly the same way. The joke for the banks is that they only*

*have to make sure that the risk is distributed evenly among the betting parties. Then they earn on the commission and take no risk themselves.«*

*»Sounds quite plausible,« says Jan.*

*»Yes, it is,« Patrick continues. »The problem is simply the unimaginably large amount of virtual money that has accumulated there over the years. You remember the bailouts of the various countries, in previous financial crises. There were vast amounts of new money created just to save the systemically important banks from collapse.«*

*»I thought it would have also been about raising the inflation value and interest rates to a higher level to encourage people to consume and stimulate the economy.«*

*»Yes, but that didn't work. All the new money has been sucked into the already inflated derivatives system like a sponge and has further inflated the virtual money supply trapped in it. Our Prof says that the volume of derivatives traded worldwide, exceeds the gross national product of the entire world economy many times over. But this also means that all the money in these derivatives exists only in the heads of the investors. If investors now start to have doubts about the functioning of this system and lose their confidence in this form of investment, they will try to withdraw their money from it. But that cannot work because, as I said, there is no real money in the system at all.«*

*»Sounds a bit like the fairy tale about the emperor who has no clothes on,« Jan grins with a dose of gallows humor.*

*»Yes exactly, except that the consequences are of course considerable. If this bubble bursts, it means that all the supposed capital disappears into thin air. We're not talking about small investors who lose their nest eggs. This is about all life insurance companies that cannot pay out anything to their customers when the contract expires. Or about states that have no more money to pay their civil servants.«*

*»Then you and I have nothing to worry about. I haven't invested anything that I could lose. My account is usually in the red!« Jan tries convulsively to discover something positive about the whole mess.*

*»Basically, you're right. But we don't live alone on an island. In the meantime, everything in the world is closely interlocked, like a huge gearbox. If someone throws a shovel full of sand or stones into it, the whole thing blocks and comes to a standstill. That was the gloomy future scenario that my professor painted on the wall today: If this derivatives bubble bursts now, the consequences will be so severe that there will be a huge crash of our current financial and economic system. With consequences that he doesn't want to imagine.«*

## **Social engineering**

When David returns to his apartment in the evening, he immediately looks on his computer.

»Sorry, no valid password found!« announces the hacker program, which has now reached the end of its efforts.

*»What a bummer. The good Klaus doesn't make it easy for me even after his death!«*

David is considering whether he should quit here. But he has tasted blood and once he has bitten off more than he can chew, he doesn't give up so easily.

Klaus has obviously chosen a secure password, as was to be expected. All of a sudden, David sees the light: Of course! Klaus always made fun of those idiots who use their girlfriend's name, a date of birth or some other insecure stuff as a password! And on that occasion he had once sent David a password-protected time sheet. At that time he was quite proud of his password, because he thought it was absolutely unbreakable: "Weser-Erfurt-Elbe".

David had to listen to an agonizingly long monologue about the origin of this password. It had something to do with cities on watersheds, which normally hardly existed, but in rare cases did. The former capital of Thuringia, Erfurt, was apparently such a case. Here, the domain boundary between the Weser and Elbe river systems runs right through the former city area. Which, ironically, has resulted in Erfurt being a divided city today! The city center belongs to the Elbe domain, while the western suburbs belong to the Weser domain. Fortunately, these are friendly and cooperating main domains, so the resulting disadvantages such as border controls and different currencies and laws are still within tolerable limits compared to other domain crossings.

Klaus, however, was convinced that the combination of these three words and the two special characters would withstand any brute force and dictionary attack, especially since Erfurt is located neither on the Elbe nor on the Weser, but on their tributaries Gera and Nesse.

*»Well, if he wasn't wrong about that!«*

David tries to open the text file and enters "Weser-Erfurt-Elbe" as password.

*»Password is invalid!«*

*»Crap! Would have been too good if Klaus had used the same password more than once!«* David goes to his wall shelf and takes out his old school atlas. As he holds the thick and heavy book in his hands, he is overcome with almost sentimental feelings. Those were the days when people still read real paper books. Apart from the atlas, David owns exactly twelve other books. He can't even fill a single shelf with them! By contrast, his current eBook reader contains an estimated fifty thousand locally stored books. And that's not to mention his media contract, which gives him online access at any time to every book and newspaper ever published in the history of mankind.



He carefully places the old atlas on the table and opens the map of Europe. He can still remember how he had to draw the domain boundaries here in geography class with Mrs. Schmidt. The lines are already somewhat faded, but still recognizable. In fact, there are hardly any larger towns to be found along the watersheds. Which is basically not surprising. People have always preferred to settle along rivers. They had water there for drinking and washing, and when trade relations became more important, the rivers were preferred transport routes; long before there were roads. On the mountains, on the other hand, there was only wind and a beautiful view. David is sure that the solution to the password he is looking for must be somewhere on this map. But where?

After pondering for a while, he comes up with an idea: During his studies, he had once written a term paper on the computer-aided recording of river courses in Europe. At that time, he had an extensive geodetic database at his disposal, which he had copied without permission and which must still exist today somewhere in the depths of his hard disk. After a few minutes of intensive searching, he actually finds what he is looking for. He studies the structure of the data records and gradually a solution matures in his brain. Yes, that's how it should work:

*»I write a computer program that extracts from the data sets all known locations and mountains that lie on one of the European watersheds. For each of these coordinate points, I also use the database to calculate the two-sided draining river systems. I write the results found in this process as a river-place-river triple into a text file and use it as a new dictionary in the brute force cracker.«*

David orders a pizza from his favorite Italian restaurant. While waiting for the delivery, he makes himself a pot of tea and goes through the structure of the software to be written. It won't be trivial, but it is doable. While he scribbles a few class diagrams for the software architecture on his scratch pad, the pizza delivery man is already ringing the doorbell.

With pizza, tea and lots of adrenaline in his blood, David gets to work. It's going to be a long night.

## **Bridge Saints**

Gianna is doing research on the Internet when the doorbell rings. When she opens it, Salvatore is standing in front of her, holding the latest issue of La Città in front of her.

*»Ciao Salvatore, is our story in there yet?«*

*»Shh, be quiet! Can I come in?«*

*»Yeah sure, come on in! What's the mystery?«*

Gianna closes the apartment door and leads Salvatore into the living room of the shared apartment.

*»Well, tell me! Are they reporting on the bribery scandal? Did they print the transfer receipts?«*

*»No, so far they haven't said a word about it. I have closely followed all the issues that have appeared so far. Nothing! Instead, this article is in it today.«*

Salvatore puts the newspaper on the living room table and turns to the third page. In large letters it says:

### **HOMOTRAGY IN THE VATICAN**

*The bodies of two priests were found yesterday under the Ponte Guiseppe Mazzini. The lifeless bodies were hanging from two ropes that had been placed under the bridge. As confirmed by the Vatican, the dead are citizens of the Vatican State. The circumstances indicate that they voluntarily departed from life. The Vatican press spokesman explained that a suicide note had been found. In it, the two priests had stated that they had been having a homosexual relationship with each other for some time, which they no longer wanted to answer for before God and their consciences. The Pope has asked God for mercy for the lost souls and asks all the faithful in Rome to do the same.*

Below the article is emblazoned a large photograph showing a close-up of the lifeless men dangling in their priestly robes. Gianna takes a closer look at the photograph. Then she turns white as a sheet.

*»Oh my God! The one on the left is the man I was talking to in the confessional!«*

*»Are you sure?«*

*»Yes, of course! The striking face, the dark curls. That's him!«*

*»Do you believe the suicide story?«*

*»Never ever! He risked his neck for more justice in the world. You don't kill yourself a few days later because you suddenly have moral doubts about your sexual orientation. They killed him, I'm sure of it! Besides, I don't think he was gay!«*

*»How would you know?« asks Salvatore curiously.*

*»As a woman, you notice things like that,« Gianna replies flippantly. Then she asks in a thoughtful voice, »Do you think he had to die because he gave us the documents?«*

*»That may well be. And then the other priest is probably the one from the Vatican bank who leaked the papers to him. I thought you said there was going to be another person!«*

*»Yes, but that would be a real execution of two people for betraying secrets. Do you trust the Vatican to do that?« Gianna asks doubtfully.*

*»Not to the Vatican, but to some of the guys in there. It is there certainly like everywhere in the world: There are good and bad people. Apparently there are some particularly unscrupulous bad people in there!«*

*»But how did they get on to those two?«*

*»I have no idea. But since the newspaper hasn't reported anything about the scandal so far, I think there must be someone there who*

*stopped it from being published and informed the Vatican instead!«*

*»Could it be that your acquaintance at the newspaper had something to do with it?«*

Salvatore shakes his head.

*»Guiseppe? No, I don't think so. I wouldn't trust him with something like that. But I'll talk to him again. Maybe he'll have some idea what went down.«*

*»Do you want to visit him in his office again? I don't think that's a good idea!«*

*»No, you're right. I don't want to be seen there again. There's something fishy about that place. I have a better idea where I could talk to him. He lives near Piazza Gian Lorenzo Bernini and often plays bocce in the park there in the evening with his neighbors. I'll see if I can catch him there. That's not as far as the newspaper building, then. I can ride my bike there.«*

*»Well, then at least I don't have to worry about my scooter!"*  
*Gianna jokes. »When do you think you'll go see him?«*

*»I want to sort this out as soon as possible, preferably today. I think I'm going to head over there right now. Promise me you'll take care of yourself. I didn't mention your name to Guiseppe, but you never know! Don't open the door unless you know who's in front of it!«*

Gianna promises Salvatore not to open the door to anyone she doesn't know personally. Thank God she has a peephole in the apartment door. From inside, she can see who is standing outside. Nevertheless, Gianna has a sinking feeling in her stomach. The dead priest knew her name, her email address and her video blog. If he had indeed been murdered, his killers could have gotten all this information out of him by force.

## Panic

The situation in Germany, Europe and many countries around the world had come to a dramatic head in recent weeks. In Cologne, people had taken to the streets en masse to protest the closure of the banks and the looming loss of their savings deposits. Jan, too, had followed the call of the AStA<sup>4</sup> at his university and, armed with a whistle and banner, marched through the streets of Cologne's old town to Heumarkt, where a large rally of student organizations was taking place.

The courts had ordered banks to reopen on a regular basis. However, the possibility of withdrawing cash per person had been severely limited, so that it was just sufficient for the procurement of food and goods for daily use.

The federal government in Berlin had hastily rushed through an emergency law that gave police authorities extensive rights to prevent looting and rioting.

Public life came to a standstill. Many employees were released from work and did not have to show up at their place of work. The entire retail trade in Cologne had come to a standstill, with a few exceptions, such as grocery stores and pharmacies. The universities had also suspended their teaching activities until further notice. Gasoline and diesel were still available at many gas stations, but prices had skyrocketed to the point that hardly any drivers could afford this luxury. Public transportation, on the other hand, had remained intact. Cologne's streetcars and buses ran irregularly. However, the crowds in the vehicles were limited, which was mainly caused by the absence of commuters.

Jan Eckert had decided to visit his parents again after a long time. It took him about half an hour by regional train to reach the train station in the small town west of Cologne, where his parents and his little sister Anna live. From the station, it's another half hour's walk to the edge of town.

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4 Asta: General Student Committee - The executive and external representative body of the student body.

*»It's good to see you again!« his mother greets him at the door.  
»Quite a bit has happened since we last saw each other.«*

Jan gives his mother the usual kiss of welcome and then takes his things to his old nursery on the second floor. When he comes back downstairs and enters the living room, his father notices that he is there. He turns off the TV and asks Jan to sit down. Then he goes down to the basement and gets two bottles of beer. After organizing bottle openers and glasses, he takes a seat across from his son at the coffee table.

*»How are you?«*

*»Thanks, I've been better. How about you?«*

*»I'm okay. I have been condemned to do nothing for two weeks now. My employer has informed me that he is releasing me from work until further notice.«*

*»Do you at least continue to get your paycheck?«*

*»The letter didn't say that so clearly. But in the end it doesn't matter, because I can't get the money anyway. The savings bank here in town is only open two days a week now, and the money we can get there is just enough for the bare necessities.«*

*»It's the same here in Cologne. Why did they release you, of all people?«*

*»They've sent home everyone in the Group who they don't absolutely need to keep the power plants running. A safety officer at an administrative headquarters is obviously unnecessary. I can only hope that they are right. Basically, I could get used to being an early retiree. I ride my bike a lot now and do a lot of other sports. I'm still fit and hope that it will stay that way for a while. But the uncertainty of how it will all continue is still driving me crazy. I've almost gotten used to the idea that we can write off our stock assets. But what will happen to our savings book now? The people on TV promise us that the guaranteed sum of a hundred thousand euros is safe. But what use is that to us if we can't get our hands on the money?«*

*»Yes,« sighs Jan, »I no longer believe the politicians' statements either. First and foremost, they want to reassure the population. Not a day goes by in Cologne without some kind of large-scale demonstration. The police use water cannons and rubber bullets against peaceful demonstrators. But the official media hardly report on it. Only on the Internet are videos circulating about what's going on.«*

Meanwhile, a loud call from Jan's mother comes from the kitchen:

*»Jan, Peter, dinner is ready! Will you please come?«*

The gentlemen don't need to be told twice. They take their beer glasses to the table in the kitchen. Elvira Eckert has once again brought out everything the freezer has to offer. Unfortunately, it is now almost empty and Elvira Eckert has a stomachache thinking about how she will feed her family in the future. The shelves in the supermarket had become emptier and emptier in recent days.

## **Bagpipe**

In Vienna, morning is already dawning as David types the last lines of code on the computer keyboard. Writing the software took longer than originally expected. But now comes the moment of truth. David starts the program and stares intently at the size of the result file.

10 kB, 20 kB, 30 kB, 40 kB, 50 kB, ...

The dictionary on the hard drive grows by the second. For the first time in hours, David feels the tension in him ease a little. He uses the time to go to the bathroom and to make a coffee. When he returns to the computer, the program is finished. On the hard disk is a freshly generated text file consisting of about 370,000 short "river-place-river" lines. The river names are constantly repeated and most of them are well known to David. From Tagus and Guadalquivir in the west to Don and Volga in the east. They correspond to the main domains that David had to memorize in geography class at the time. The vast majority of the place names listed, however, are completely unknown to him.

Now it's time: David starts the brute force cracker and activates the text file he created instead of the integrated dictionaries. The progress bar now looks much livelier than at the first attempt. It doesn't take five minutes, then a green dialog box announces on the screen:

*»File successfully decrypted! The password is Rhine-Bagpipe<sup>5</sup>-Weser«.*

David stares stunned at the computer monitor.

*»Excuse me? Bagpipe? What's that supposed to be?«*

But indeed! A short research confirms it: The >Bagpipe is a 673 meter high mountain in the Rothaar mountains. The springs on the north side of the mountain flow into the Weser via the Eder and the Fulda. The springs on the south side, on the other hand, enter the Rhine via the Lahn. "Rhine-Bagpipe-Weser" follows exactly the same principle as "Weser-Erfurt-Elbe". A classic Klaus Baumann password.

David tries to imagine what Klaus must have thought when he discovered this mountain on the map. He probably laughed in his pants and never believed in his life that someone could figure out such a stupid password. Well, somehow he was right: As long as he was alive, no one found out.

David takes a deep breath. The effort was worth it after all. He quickly skims the decrypted file: Lots of data records for some accounts and money transactions. But he really doesn't have the nerve for that at the moment. Instead, he encrypts the file with a new password:

*»KB,tob,stRaWthw«*

Actually quite easy to remember:

*»Klaus Baumann, the old bagpipe, swims through Rhine and Weser to the watershed.«*

Then he turns off the computer and looks at the clock. It's just after six. And at 10 o'clock, Thomas Prenninger has already squeezed him into

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5 German: Sackpfeife



another project meeting in the Millennium Tower. David sets the alarm on his smartphone for half past nine, takes off his shirt and pants and lies down in bed. After two minutes, he's asleep.

## Peephole

Salvatore has only been gone half an hour when the doorbell rings again. Gianna's heart begins to race. Who can that be now? Marco and Maria don't usually get home for another hour, and they also have their own key. She tiptoes to the apartment door and looks through the peephole. She sees a tall man she has never seen before. Gianna takes a step back and holds her breath, trying not to make a sound. The bell on the door rings a second time. Gianna moves her right eye very close to the peephole and watches the man again. Then everything happens very quickly: Gianna sees the stranger bend his right leg and kick the door. Then the lights go out for her. After a few minutes, she slowly regains consciousness.

*»So my little dove, now you're going to tell Uncle Bruno what you know!«*

Gianna doesn't know anything. Neither where she is, nor what is going on here at all. Her head hurts as if it would burst at any moment. She lies with her back on the hard floor and feels the pressure of her hands under her spine. Trying to get her hands out from behind her back, she notices that her wrists are bound. Her gaze is directed to the ceiling of the room. The ceiling lamp looks familiar to her: She is obviously in her room in the shared flat. When she lowers her gaze a bit, she looks directly into the terrifying eyes of a tall strange man who sits astride her pelvis and presses something cold against her neck with his right hand.

*»If you make a sound, I'll cut your throat! Do you understand me?«*

Gianna tries to nod, but has the feeling that her head is about to explode.

*»What do you want from me? Who are you?" she whispers, completely frightened.*

*»I ask the questions! Remember that! So, what did you do with the papers the priest gave you?«*

*»I don't have them anymore!«*

Gianna feels the pressure of the knife blade disappear from her neck. Instead, her skull almost bursts when the man gives her a resounding slap with his left hand.

*»I didn't ask you if you still have the documents, but what you did with them! Please listen when I ask you something!«*

Gianna starts to cry. She has enough of a headache for that. In reality, however, she is feverishly trying to buy time to think up a halfway plausible story.

*»I didn't want anything to do with it, so I sent it to the newspaper anonymously!«*

Actually, she would have expected another slap in the face now, but it did not happen. Apparently this thug doesn't know as much as he pretends.

*»To which newspaper?«*

*»To La Città.«*

*»Did you make copies of the papers?«*

*»No, I sent them as I received them.«*

*»Did you tell anyone about the papers?«*

Gianna thinks feverishly about whether she should tell him about Salvatore. If Salvatore's friend were the traitor, the stranger would certainly know that there was another confidant. On the other hand, he would probably have reacted differently to the lie about the anonymous mailing. Gianna decides not to drag Salvatore into this, too.

*»No, no! I was so afraid that I would get into trouble. That's why I put the papers in an envelope and sent them directly to the newspaper!«*

*»Why didn't you throw them away?«*

*»The priest told me that it is important that these papers get out to the public. But he also said that there was nothing wrong with it and that it was for a good cause. I believed him and never thought I was doing anything wrong with it.«*

Gianna hopes that she doesn't blush when she lies. But the way her head feels right now, it probably doesn't matter much anymore. She is a little ashamed of the dead priest for twisting the truth so much. But he probably won't hold it against her anymore.

The monster above her seems to be thinking and then abruptly asks:

*»Where's your computer?«*

*»It's right there on the desk.«*

*»Don't move and just shut up!«*

The man slowly rises, walks to the desk and looks at her notebook disdainfully. After being freed from the weight of this elephant, Gianna can take a deep breath for the first time. Carefully, she tries to turn her head to better observe what the stranger is doing to her things. At the moment he seems to want to get a rough overview of her room. Then he suddenly starts rummaging through Gianna's desk, her dresser and her closet. He rips out all the objects that are not nailed down and in a few moments turns Gianna's well-ordered room into a debris field. He is obviously looking for something specific, because he takes a closer look at some folders and stacks of paper before continuing his destructive work.

After he has searched everything, he scratches his head briefly and then turns back to Gianna. With his right hand, he reaches inside his leather jacket and pulls out a black pistol, which he slowly points between Gianna's eyes. He stands there for what feels like an eternity, then says in a threatening voice:

*»Now listen to me, young lady: If these papers ever turn up again, you will surely die. And always remember: I also know your parents and your friends!«*

Then he puts the pistol back into his shoulder holster. From his jacket pocket, he takes out a thick piece of tape and sticks it over Gianna's mouth from ear to ear. When he has made sure that his victim cannot scream, he goes to the desk, unplugs Gianna's notebook from the power supply, and folds it shut.

*»I'll take this with me! And you stay here quietly for the next 30 minutes, otherwise I'll come back!«*

Then he takes Gianna's notebook and wordlessly leaves the apartment.

## **Hyperinflation**

It's winter in Germany. It's winter in Europe. It's winter all over the world - not just in the northern hemisphere. The shadow of an economic crisis unprecedented in human history is darkening the world down to its last corner. Nothing is as it once was. No one knows what will become. Is this the apocalypse? The end of the world? Is there still a glimmer of hope somewhere? What does history teach us? Has there ever been a comparable situation? Civilizations and peoples have arisen, prospered and disappeared countless times. One man's joy, another man's sorrow. But what does absolute chaos mean in the age of globalization? Are there only losers? Who bears the blame, the responsibility? Who knows the way? Who has the wisdom? True wisdom! Once upon a time everything was good! How do we get back to where we once were? What is home? Where we live or how we lived?

There is snow in Cologne. Jan Eckert has spent the entire morning standing in line at the food distribution point. Although he has put on several layers of thick clothing, he is completely frozen through. When he tries to get his apartment key out of the side pocket of his outdoor jacket, it falls to the ground. His fingers are clammy and without any feeling. Only

on his third try does he manage to turn the key in the door lock so that the apartment door opens.

It is warm in the apartment. Relatively warm. The room thermometer in the kitchen shows 8° Celsius. Jan puts the bag with the bread and butter on the kitchen table and goes to his room. On the bed lies his down feather sleeping bag. The good piece had already accompanied him on countless camping trips. Now it has become his most important tool in the fight against the icy cold. After half an hour of shivering warm, he feels his spirits slowly returning.

Later, when he goes into the kitchen, Patrick and Georgios are sitting at the kitchen table, chewing wordlessly on their poor meal. Jan also cuts himself a thick slice of bread and smears it thinly with the butter he has brought with him.

*»That's all there was today?« Patrick asks with an expressionless face.*

*»No, but tomorrow there may be eggs.«*

Then the conversation falls silent again. After each of the three men has eaten his slice of bread with infinite slowness, this time it is Georgios who interrupts the eerie silence:

*»I will go back to Greece. I can't stand it here anymore!«*

*»How do you imagine?« asks Patrick. Do you want to get on a plane and fly back? All the airports are shut down. All international long-distance traffic has been suspended for months. Trains run only sporadically and only within Germany. Even long-distance buses can no longer run due to acute fuel shortages.«*

*»I know. But if I stay here, I'll die. I have no work here, no income and nothing reasonable to eat. People on the street call me names and tell me to get out of where I came from. This morning, when Jan was lining up with our food stamps, the landlord was there. He said if we don't finally pay our rent, he's going to kick us out.«*

*Jan tries to calm him down: »Come on, he can't do that. The new emergency laws forbid the eviction of insolvent tenants. Nobody has money to pay rent anyway. What would he do with the empty apartment? Look for new solvent tenants? Don't make me laugh!«*

*»He said he needs to feed his family and depends on the rental income. His children are starving.«*

*»And us? Living in luxury or what?« Patrick interferes again.  
»Why don't you ask him when the heating is going to work again? You can't charge rent for an apartment without heating!«*

*»He said it wasn't his fault that the gas company wasn't delivering gas and that the power supply was intermittent.«*

The heating system of the apartment building was already shut down about a month ago. After almost no country in the world accepted the U.S. dollar and the euro as more means of payment, all international trade relations were abruptly put on hold. No one supplies resources or services in exchange for the former reserve currencies anymore. Oil and gas supplies from Russia were cut off overnight. German gas storage facilities were still able to supply the necessary fuel for heating systems for a while. Then the furnace was off.

A few very clever people thought they could get gas again by switching gas suppliers. However, they had to realize soon that, despite many gas providers, there was only one gas network. And that was now without gas.

*Jan thinks out loud: »If we can no longer buy gas from the Russians in euros or dollars, then we'll just have to offer them something else in return. They themselves are interested in selling their natural resources at a profit!«*

*Patrick answers: »That will certainly happen, but not as quickly as you want. How long do you think it will take to negotiate and drink vodka until both sides are convinced that they won't be ripped off? What do you want to trade? German cars? Those are luxury items and nobody needs them at the moment! Food? You can see what we have at the moment! Trade relations are very*

*complex constructs. You can imagine it like the mobile<sup>6</sup> in our hallway. Due to the loss of the trade currencies, the cords have now been cut and the parts are lying on the floor. Try to fix that quickly, without cords!«*

*»But there is still the euro as official currency!«*

*»Yes, but it is losing value massively every day. It's really quite crass: For years, the European Central Bank has been frantically trying to raise inflation in order to strengthen consumption and stimulate the economy. Everything was for the cat! The inflation remained practically constantly on zero, just like the interest. And at one blow the inflation rate explodes, as if it wanted to make up now for everything, which was denied to it so far. Hyperinflation is called what happens here at the moment!«*

Indeed, prices for food and all daily necessities had gone through the roof in recent months. At the moment, 850,000 euros was being paid for a loaf of bread on the black market. If the government had not introduced the issue of food stamps, the inhabitants of German cities would already have starved to death en masse.

*»It's clear that you don't deliver natural gas for something that might not be worth anything tomorrow. Then you'd rather keep it and sell it later. I would do that, too. But our government has to do something to get the trade going again!«*

*»The federal government? You can wait a long time for that! Without money, they are basically completely incapable of acting. No, the only institutions that are currently getting things done are the small municipalities. Like the newly founded council of the city of Cologne. It has just decided that all citizens who are able to work will only receive money and food stamps if they participate in voluntary labor service. The food comes from the surrounding municipalities and is exchanged for services provided by the city, such as medical care. As a municipality, you still have real room to maneuver there. On the federal level, on the other hand, without money, their hands are tied.«*

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6 Free-hanging, balanced, light structure moved by a faint breeze.

*»Speaking of medical care: I think Elena just got off her shift.«*

*»Buenas tardes!« Elena greets the assembled group of men.  
"Well, don't you have anything better to do than mope around here?"*

*»You can talk!« Georgios replies. »At least you have a job and a meaningful task.«*

*»You don't mean that! Do you have any idea what's going on at our hospital? We have hardly any medicine and bandages left. Some of the doctors are operating without anesthesia. People are dying in the corridors without us being able to help them. These are conditions like in a war!«*

*»Have you already experienced one?« Jan asks sarcastically.*

*»No, but my grandfather told me about the Spanish Civil War when I was a little girl. It must have been something like that back then!«*

*»Georgios told us that he wants to go back to Greece. What do you think of this harebrained idea?«*

*»Georgios, are you crazy?« Elena looks at Georgios as stunned as if he had announced that he wanted to fly to the moon. »You'll never get there in the current situation. Times will get better and you'll have to hold out here until they do!«*

*»Exactly,« Jan adds. »That's what we've already told him. After all, we'll soon be assigned to work duty and get to make ourselves useful in the city. For money and food, of course.«*

Georgios' face turns pale and his eyes become moist. With a broken voice he begins to tell what he experienced yesterday:

*»You guys have no idea! Yesterday I went to the town hall and wanted to volunteer for labor service. Some slimy asshole sat there and asked me laughing what I had learned and what I could do. I told him that I was an IT specialist, but that I would do any job where someone was needed. You know what he said? I should*



*go back to where I came from. They wouldn't need scumbags like me!«*

For what feels like an eternity, there is a horrified silence in the room. Then Elena comfortingly strokes Georgios' head and says:

*»Don't take it to heart like that. I sometimes have to listen to stupid sayings like that, too. But not all Germans think like that. I have also experienced a lot of kindness and gratitude in my work.«*

But Georgios is deeply hurt in his pride. He doesn't want to live in such a cold country anymore. Greece is certainly in complete chaos at the moment. But at least the Greeks learned to live with it some time ago. He hadn't heard from his parents since the telecommunication links abroad had been cut. But the Greeks had never been short of food and drink since ancient times. And the sun also means better for his homeland than for the Teutons. He doesn't know exactly how yet, but he knows he's going back to Salonika.

## **Business trip**

*Un ballo nuovo porta ritmo nei fiancho della città  
Ci vendiamo, troviamo, chiediamo che cosa si fa ...*

These strange Italian lines from a well-known song by the great Viennese singer and songwriter Falco run through David's head when he is informed by his project manager about his latest plans. Thomas Prenninger has just informed him that they will be flying to Rome tomorrow for three days. Rome - why not Africa?

The Vatican Bank is soon to be connected to the cross-domain financial transaction system. Thomas will plan the milestones with the management there, and David is to take care of the necessary implementation details at the same time as the IT specialists on site. The bank's Learjet is already reserved for their flight, he said. »What a load of bollocks!« David thinks to himself as he is once again presented with a *fait accompli*.

Why does this song come to mind when he thinks of Rome? David is a great admirer of Falco - or rather Johann Hölzel, as he was known in his real life. Only two years ago he died at the ripe old age of 93. Half of Vienna had paid their last respects to him at his renewed burial at the Vienna Central Cemetery. After his staged accidental death in 1998, he had long retreated into voluntary exile in South America. Only when his fatherland lay helplessly on the ground after the great economic catastrophe did he return to his old homeland on one of the first banana steamers and took an active part in the reconstruction. His "Out-of-the-Dark" open-air concerts in the park of Schönbrunn Palace at that time are considered an absolute cult today - even among young people like David. For the inhabitants of Vienna, they gave rise to something like hope that things would get better again after all the years of privation, which they soon did. From then on, Johann Hölzel, as the cultural director of the city of Vienna, was committed to all musical matters and contributed significantly to the emerging spirit of optimism. When, many years later, he suffered a fatal heart attack while walking along the Danube, he was the first and so far the only rock musician to receive an honorary funeral from the Danube domain.

*»What should I take with me to Rome?« David wants to know from Thomas.*

*»Well, what you IT guys need in the way of documentation! How about interface descriptions of our systems, for example?«*

*»Oh, I always thought the Vatican Bank implemented its software according to the Old and New Testaments!«*

David feels he's being taken for a ride by his project manager. Always these unplanned, sudden actions! Afterwards, everyone is always surprised when nothing works as expected. But it's always the same: If a project is successful, it was managed correctly, and if it fails, it's the fault of the incompetent experts.

*»Why do we get to fly on the board's Learjet?« David asks curiously.*

*»Be happy! Or would you rather travel with one of those pilgrim bombers? Our mission has been ordered by the highest authority and I think it's only fair that they make their plane available to us. After all, there are no normal scheduled flights to Rome and I don't really fancy a two-hour charter flight with permanently chanting and praying Catholics. But if you see it differently?«*

*»No no, it's okay!« David quickly replies. »When do we leave?«*

*»The plane departs tomorrow afternoon at three. The flight will then take about 90 minutes. That means we arrive in Fiumicino in the late afternoon and are taken to our hotel in the Vatican. Have you ever been there? Total luxury I tell you! In the evening we are greeted by our hosts. I guess they have organized some kind of social event for us. Take something decent to wear. Tie is mandatory! The next day will be stressful. You'll spend the whole day with the experts there and you're supposed to compare their software with ours.«*

*»Yeah it's clear. And until there's white smoke, we won't be let out of our meeting room!« David grins.*

*»Go ahead and make your jokes!« Thomas continues. »Anyway, I'll be sitting down with middle management all day and working on organizational challenges. I suspect this will be a long day for both of us. On the third day, a wrap-up with the high eminences is planned in the morning. After that, we will be transferred back to the airport and fly back. Any questions?«*

David has no questions. He only knows that he wants to go home as early as possible today. He still has the short night he spent cracking Klaus Baumann's stupid password in his bones. He also wanted to take a closer look at those ominous data records that ultimately cost his colleague his life. This business trip is as inconvenient for him as a boil on his ass. But that's his job. And besides, it gives him the opportunity to settle his

overtime and travel time accounts. And when else in his life would he have the opportunity to come to Rome?

Rome - for most people this is a white spot in the domain system. Sure, everyone had heard something about the ancient Roman Empire in history class. In addition, David had once found a few funny comic books in an antiquarian bookstore. In them, the ancient Romans were constantly fighting with the Gauls and always got the short end of the stick. But that time was two thousand years ago, and so Rome is not only geographically far away from David's current horizon of perception. A school friend of his - a devout Catholic - had once flown to Rome with his parents at Easter for a papal audience and had then tried to work on him missionarily. But he could not tell much about the city of Rome as such, but only about some liturgical celebrations and the walled compound of the Vatican State, where he was barracked with his family.

Seen in this light, this trip is perhaps a good opportunity to see and experience something new.

## Headache

Maria and Marco had met by chance on their way home. On the last hundred meters before their house, they had begun to exchange the news of their working day. Engrossed in their conversation, they climb the many stairs in the stairwell to their apartment. Marco is the first to reach the top. Suddenly he stops, frozen.

*»We've been burgled! The door is open and the lock is broken!«*

*»Watch out!« Maria whispers. »Maybe the burglars are still inside!«*

Marco takes his butterfly knife out of his jacket and locks it with a deft hand movement. It's just as well that he never leaves home without his companion.

*»Wait here!« he whispers back. »I'm going in.«*

Silently he tiptoes into the hallway. From the kitchen he notices some noise. Marco creeps to the open kitchen door and peers in cautiously.

*»My God, Gianna! What do you look like? What happened to you?«*

Gianna had left her room in the meantime and tried to free herself from her bonds. However, she had imagined it would be easier. She had been able to get a large kitchen knife from the drawer, but had failed to use it sensibly with her hands tied behind her back.

*»Hmm Hmmm Hmmmmmmm!«*

*»Yes wait, I'll help you!«*

With a quick cut of his knife, Marco cuts through the shackles on Gianna's wrists. With her hands now free, she then pulls the tape from her mouth with a jerk.

*»I've been mugged!« she exclaims.*

In the meantime, Maria has also come into the kitchen. She lets out a cry of horror when she sees Gianna.

*»How do you look like? Your eye is all blue! What did they do to you?«*

*»Sit down for a minute! I'll tell you everything.«*

Gianna tells them both in detail what happened. From the meeting with her informant in the confessional, to Salvatore, the newspaper and the dead priests under the bridge over the Tiber, to the robbery that has just taken place. Marco and Maria listen attentively. When Gianna finishes, Marco starts to rant loudly:

*»Why didn't you tell us about this? Do you know how much danger you've put us in? Just imagine if Maria had been home alone now instead of you!«*

Now Gianna starts to cry after all.

*»I didn't know how this would turn out! If I had known, then I would never have gotten involved in the matter or at least warned you!«*

*»How did that guy get into the apartment? Did you let him in yourself?«*

*»Marco!« Maria interferes. »You saw the broken door! He broke it open or kicked it in. You know how rotten everything is here!«*

Gianna thinks hard. Then she says:

*»I can't tell you at all how that one got in! The last thing I remember is sitting at my desk in my room, preparing a blog report. Then I blacked out. I can't remember it again until the pig was sitting on top of me and my hands were already tied behind my back.«*

*»Where did the black eye and the bump on the head come from?« Maria asks with a worried look.*

*»I don't know! I know that the guy slapped me once, as he was already sitting on me. But by then I had this hell of a headache and he didn't hit the eye with that slap either.«*

*»We had a first aid class the other day in the teacher's lounge and it sure looks to me like you have a bad concussion! You need to see a doctor! Are you feeling sick? Did you have to throw up?«*

*»I feel really sick. But I didn't throw up. It wouldn't have gone well with my mouth taped shut! I'm definitely not going to the doctor! He just asks stupid questions and costs a lot of money that I don't have.«*

Marco nods and probably sees it similarly. As far as he can remember, he has only ever been to the doctor once in his life. That was when, as a teenager, he had once taken a borrowed motorcycle out for a spin and was then knocked off the bike at high speed by a mutt running across the road. Unlike the dog, however, he had at least survived the collision. The bystanders had rushed him to a doctor, who patched him up. Afterwards he

had received a good beating from his parents. On the one hand because of the broken motorcycle and on the other hand because of the doctor's bill.

*»I understand. I wouldn't do that either if I were you. But what are you going to do now? Are you going to press charges with the police?«*

*»I don't know what to do yet. I'm just scared right now! I don't have any proof either. The guy even took my computer! How am I supposed to work now? Do you know how much such a thing costs? It was really old, the battery didn't work anymore and some keys were missing. But I still need a computer for my work! Where am I supposed to get a new one in a hurry?«*

In the Tiber domain - with the exception of the Vatican State, of course - functioning computers are in absolute short supply. Gianna had received her notebook as a gift from her father many years ago and had guarded it like the apple of her eye ever since. Compared to the devices produced today in the wealthy domains, it was a true antique. At the time, the operating system was still produced by a software company that now specializes in manufacturing rubber boots for forestry workers in Redmond<sup>7</sup>.

*»Did you at least back up your data?« Marco wants to know.*

*»Most of it did. I've been regularly synchronizing my notebook with Salvatore's. Our last backup was only a few days ago. So that's not so bad. Much worse is the loss of the device. You know how hard it is to get working computers around here!«*

Marco doesn't know much about computers. His interests are more focused on tangible things like cars and motorcycles. He therefore tries to change the subject.

*»I would like to know what happened before you regained consciousness in your room. Let's assume he kicked in the apartment door while you were in your room. Maybe you came*

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<sup>7</sup> Insignificant domain-free city on the Pacific coast of the North American continent

*out of your room because of the noise and you ran into each other. But why did he beat you half to death? He wanted to question you, not kill you!«*

*»How many times do you want me to tell you? I can't remember!«*

Gianna has had enough of being questioned. Maybe the memory of the robbery will come back at some point - and if not, nothing can be done about it anyway. Gianna goes into her room and lies down on her bed. Maybe a little sleep will do her pounding head some good.

## **Farewell letters**

Winter is over. Never before had the inhabitants of Cologne longed for spring as much as this year. Those who had survived until now reckoned they had a good chance of somehow surviving the next half year.

Jan's flatmate Georgios had actually put his long-cherished plan into action and left Cologne at the first signs of the coming spring. One morning they had found the following letter from him on the dining table.

*My dear friends,  
please forgive me for not saying goodbye to you personally I just can't find the courage to do so. I will make my way back to Greece and seek my fortune in the homeland. Keep your fingers crossed that I manage to reach my destination safely. I want to thank you for everything you have done for me during our time together. Without you I would not have survived the past year. Neither physically nor mentally. Let us hope that these dark times will soon pass and that we will meet again somewhere under better circumstances.*

*Antío!*

*Georgios*

Even though the shock was deep, the three of them had somehow expected Georgios to put his plan into action as soon as he had the opportunity. Of course, they would have tried everything to dissuade him from this daring venture. Ultimately, however, it was his own decision, which no one in the world could take away from him.



He had also been alone in the apartment far too often in recent months, so he must have perceived it as his personal prison. The other three were too busy to empathize with his desperate situation. Elena spent most of her time at the hospital and really only came home to sleep. Jan and Patrick were fully involved in their work at the community service and had too little time to take care of their roommate more intensively. As a result, he isolated himself more and more from his environment and only pursued his dreams of returning to his ancestral home.

Jan had been entrusted by the Organizing Committee for Social Affairs with the care of the elderly population. Together with twenty other former students, he had the task of providing the elderly in his district with the necessary food and medicine, if they were no longer able to get it themselves at the public distribution points. He even received a small salary for his work, which was paid in the newly introduced regional currency, the Cologne mark. At the time of its introduction, this had a fixed exchange ratio to the euro, which was derived from the historical Cologne mark, which had already existed as a unit of weight in the Middle Ages: Some joker in the financial administration had suggested that one Cologne mark should thus be the equivalent of a stack of 234 grams of five hundred euro bills. That was a thick bundle of about 200 bills, worth 100,000 euros. However, the exchange ratio only applied to the day of introduction, as the euro continued to depreciate sharply and soon fell into oblivion as a means of payment. The purchasing power of the Cologne mark, on the other hand, remained stable from the outset. Much more significant to Jan than the wages he was paid, however, was the fact that he had direct access to food through his labor service. The time of starvation in the shared flat was over.

His fellow student Patrick had to work in the administration of the newly built distribution center for necessary items of daily life due to his business knowledge. Despite his desk job, he also had the opportunity now and then to organize one or the other good and deliver it to the residential community.

On the whole, a certain spirit of optimism could already be felt in the city. As a symbolic gesture, the council had even ordered the resumption of maintenance work on Cologne Cathedral. This was not because the cathedral's stability was endangered. No, the reason lay rather in an old Cologne proverb, which says that the world would end when the Cathedral was finished.

So Jan had every reason to look to the future with some confidence again, when fate forcefully brings him back down to earth: One afternoon, shortly after he has come home and fallen dead tired onto his bed, the doorbell rings. When he opens it, the woman from the flat next door is standing in the hallway, her eyes filled with tears:

*»Oh, Mr. Eckert, I'm sorry to bother you. Your mother tried to reach you, but couldn't get through to you. She then tried me on the landline. She said that she remembered my name on the doorplate when she visited you here, and then she looked it up in the phone book because she couldn't get through to you, but none of that matters now. Mr. Eckert, your mother said that your father died and that you should come home as soon as possible! Oh my God, I am so sorry about all this! My sincere condolences Mr. Eckert. I don't even know what to say.«*

That's as far as she gets. Sobbing her heart out, she looks for the handkerchief in her kitchen apron and tries to regain her composure. Jan stands there, thunderstruck. His father dead? How can that be? He was in great shape the last time he saw him. Jan, however, had rarely come to his hometown lately. The journey there and back had been too arduous and time-consuming each time. Telephone contact had also been mostly impossible in the past months. He had actually always had a guilty conscience because he left his parents in uncertainty about his well-being. But what could he have done. Throughout the Federal Republic, families had been torn apart due to adverse circumstances, and there was nothing he could do about it. He had actually always assumed that his parents would be fine. The news of his father's death reached him like a bolt from the blue.

*»Thank you very much, Mrs. Huhnbein,« Jan says, visibly trying to compose himself. »That's really sad news that you're giving me. I will be on my way to my mother as soon as I can. Thank you very much!«*

*»Has your father been ill, then?«*

*»No, the last time I saw him was probably about a month ago. He was very much alive then. Did my mom say anything on the phone then? Whether he'd been in an accident or something?«*

*»No, no. We only spoke briefly on the phone, then the connection broke down again. Your mother only said that your father had died suddenly and that you should come as soon as possible.«*

*»Yes thank you, I will do that, Mrs. Huhnbein! And please excuse the inconvenience.«*

After Jan has closed the door again, he goes into his room and thinks about how he could call his mother. His cell phone has no network. The city's telecommunications department has been trying to activate a temporary mobile network for weeks. Sometimes it works, but never when it is needed. He could also ask his neighbor if he could try it on her landline phone. But she had said that the connection was also interrupted there and who knows from where his mother had called.

Jan goes to the window of his room and, lost in thought, looks through the gray curtains outside into the dreary courtyard of the apartment building. He had already come into contact with death several times. His grandparents had died when he was six and twelve years old, respectively. Of course, he had cried and mourned his grandparents then, but to be confronted with the death of his own father now, without any warning, was something completely different. He would have expected to be overwhelmed by any feelings. But there was only emptiness at the moment, a total inner emptiness and the desire to function now and to get to his family.

Jan looks at the clock. It's actually still early in the day. With a bit of luck, he will catch a train to his hometown today. He packs up the most necessary things, writes a short note to his roommates and leaves the house. At Barbarossa Place, he gets on the light rail and shows the driver his badge. Because of his job in the district, he is known to most of the drivers anyway, so they don't even want to see his ID. After four stops, he is at the main station and hurries up the stairs of the basement to the station concourse. The large display board has been out of order for months. Jan therefore goes to the information desk and asks the employee on duty when the next train to his hometown will leave. He looks at him pityingly and tells him that there are no trains running at the moment and that he does not know when this will change again. Jan briefly explains his desperate situation, which doesn't do him any good except for a few kind words of sympathy.

What now? Jan thinks desperately. Suddenly he has an idea. He packs his bag and sprints back underground to take the light rail back to Barbarossa Place. From there, however, he doesn't go home, but to his district's distribution center, where he usually receives the food packages for his protégés. Here, the entrance controls are really extremely sharp and Jan is glad that he has his employee ID card with him. Although the armed guard knows him, he carefully checks his ID and then lets him pass.

Jan goes to the office of the coordinator on duty and is glad to find Mr. Richter there.

*»Jan, what brings you here again? You're not on duty at all!«*

*»Good evening Mr. Richter. I have a problem. My father passed away unexpectedly and there are no trains going to my hometown at the moment. I was thinking that maybe I could get a ride on one of the delivery trucks. Do you see any possibility there?«*

*»So first of all, my condolences, my boy! I'm really sorry for you. Where are you going to go?«*

Jan tells Mr. Richter the name of the small town west of Cologne. The coordinator scratches his head and then starts leafing through the documents on his desk.

*»So Kalli is still heading for the Dutch border today and is supposed to pick up a load of wheat there. Maybe you could ride along with him. Check the garage to see if he's already there!«*

Jan does as he is told and goes into the large hall where the drivers maintain and repair their vehicles. He asks a mechanic where he can find Kalli. The man sends him to the farthest corner of the workshop, where a bearded man is changing a tire on his delivery truck.

*»Are you Kalli?«*

*»That's what it looks like. Who wants to know?« grumbles the person addressed, without averting his gaze from the wheel hub.*

*»I'm Jan and I was wondering if you could take me with you on your tour today.«*

Kalli drops his wrench on the floor and looks grimly at Jan.

*»I don't know which of us has a wheel off here! But rather you! How did you get in here anyway? You should know the rules here that I'm never allowed to take unauthorized passengers!«*

Jan explains the circumstances of his question and that Mr. Richter has sent him. With every word Jan says, Kalli's facial expression changes from threatening to friendly.

*»Excuse me! I couldn't have known that. Of course I'll take you with me! Just please tell Mr. Richter to issue an escort bill for you. Otherwise we'll get into hot water if we're stopped!«*

An hour later, Jan is sitting next to Kalli in the cab of the delivery truck, driving west over the empty arterial roads of Cologne. The whole situation seems a little eerie to him. The last time he drove home here in his small car, he was stuck in an after-work traffic jam and had been on the road for over an hour. Now the area looks deserted, with a bearded bodybuilder

sitting next to him who looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime. A loaded machine pistol leans against the driver's seat, right next to the gearshift. Jan quickly represses the thought of the situations in which it would be used and what would happen to him.

After they have passed the first two checkpoints, the mood in the driver's cabin relaxes noticeably. Kalli and Jan tell each other a few irrelevant stories from their former lives. With every laugh about some silly incident, the mutual sympathy grows. In the end, Kalli even deviates a bit from his planned route and drops Jan off in his hometown, right in front of his parents' house. Jan thanks him, takes out his bag from the luggage compartment behind his seat and wishes Kalli all the best. When Jan rings the doorbell of the family home, the van is already disappearing around the next corner.

*»My God, boy! I'm so glad you came!« his mother greeted him at the front door.*

*»Hi mom, I came as soon as I could. What happened?«*

*»Come on in first!«*

Elvira Eckert accompanies her son into the living room, where he also greets his sister Anna. He is a little startled by how much the two of them have changed since his last visit. Considering what they must have gone through in the past few days, however, this does not seem surprising to him.

His mother tells him in brief words the events of the last weeks. How his father had become more and more depressed and was no longer interested in anything or anyone. How he had spent all this time dwelling on his fate and how nothing would ever be the same again. How he had then been ordered by the local municipality to work in agriculture and how he had been denied his food stamps when he resisted. How, in the end, he had only found solace in the whiskey collection he had accumulated over the years and had not exchanged a word with his family.

Three days ago, Jan's mother had found him in the boiler room when she returned home from work. He had hung himself with the clothesline from one of the heating pipes. He had left an envelope with a short suicide note on the boiler:

*Dearest ones,  
I have come to this decision because I see no other way out for myself. Everything I have worked for in my life has been destroyed. I am too old for a new beginning. I can do nothing more for you. I do not want to be a burden to you.  
Forgive me!  
Your father*

For three days Elvira Eckert had tried in vain to reach her son by telephone. The funeral is scheduled for tomorrow at eleven o'clock.

## **Direct flight**

David has an appointment with Thomas Prenninger at the VIP lounge for the private pilots at half past two. An hour ago he sets off from home in his electric runabout. However, there is not much traffic on the Vienna city highway at midday, so he gets through faster than expected. He parks his car in parking garage A and takes the elevator up to the departure hall. Checking in at the special counter for the private planes is much faster and more comfortable than he knows from his previous vacation and business flights in the economy class. He also passes through the separate ID and security check in no time at all, so that he enters the VIP lounge ten minutes ahead of time. Of course his boss is not yet there. David takes a seat in one of the club chairs and checks the messages on his smartphone. No message from his boss, so no need to worry. The floor stewardess brings him a cocktail. Alcohol-free - he doesn't want to arrive in Rome with a smell of alcohol in his breath.

He lets his gaze sweep through the spacious lounge. So this is how you travel when money is no longer an issue. David calmly examines the faces of the other people in his vicinity. Somehow they all look quite normal. Not at all like actors, company heirs, soccer stars or anything like that. Just

normal. On the other hand, how should he recognize a super-rich trust heir?

Then David sees a familiar face: Thomas Prenninger, who comes rushing into the lounge out of breath.

*»Now I was almost too late! I missed the right exit to the airport.«*

*David secretly thinks, »How stupid can you be? Today's navigation systems can take even the dumbest fool safely to his destination.«*

Thomas Prenninger has arrived not a second too soon. The announcement is already coming from the loudspeaker:

*»Passengers Prenninger and Jonas – please proceed to gate 2. Your shuttle is standing by there.«*

The two take their luggage and head for the boarding point. An attractive young stewardess is already waiting for them.

*»Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is Isabel Hofbauer. I am your personal attendant on your flight to Rome. Would you please follow me?«*

She leads them both through the opening sliding glass door out onto the airfield, where a black limousine is already waiting. The chauffeur jumps out, opens the rear doors for them and puts the two small suitcases in the huge trunk.

*»Gentlemen, please take your seats.«*

While David and Thomas make themselves comfortable in the back of the limousine, the flight attendant takes a seat next to the driver. As soon as all the doors are closed, the limousine starts moving. The ride passes a row of scheduled airliners in parking position. David has to grin when he sees the economy passengers out there being transported to their planes: Like herrings, they stand crammed into the large articulated buses, clinging convulsively to their grab rails so they don't fall over in the rocking.



After a minute, however, the ride is already over. The limousine stops right next to the small twin-engine Learjet. Now David feels a little queasy. Is he supposed to fly in this tiny plane? The chauffeur brings the luggage into the plane and exchanges a few words with the pilot. Then he wishes David and Thomas a good flight and drives away again in his limousine.

*»Gentlemen, we can get in now. Follow me, please!«*

The two climb the narrow gangway to the entrance of the plane in tow of the flight attendant. As David steps inside the cabin, he is amazed at how tiny and toy-like it all is compared to the planes he had flown on before.

*»Please choose a seat. We are about to take off. As we roll to the runway, I'll give you some more information about safety on board. I assume you haven't flown on this aircraft before?«*

David watches with satisfaction as his boss starts nodding dutifully like a schoolboy at this question. David sits down at a window on the right, his boss at a window on the left. Nevertheless, only the narrow aisle separates them. After they have fastened their seat belts, the pilot comes out of the cockpit and briefly introduces himself with a handshake.

*»Welcome aboard, gentlemen. My name is Wolfgang Brunnhuber. I am your pilot today. We will be en route to Rome for about an hour and a half. Make yourselves comfortable. If you would like something to eat or drink, just let Isabel know. If they get bored, you are also welcome to visit me in the cockpit. My door is always open for you!«*

David will certainly not miss this opportunity. On a scheduled flight, the cockpit is more like a high-security zone. Here he finally has the opportunity to look ahead in the direction of flight and marvel at the many instruments. David feels happy like a little child.

The following procedure, however, corresponds to the usual pattern for the time being. The plane taxis to the runway, waits its turn and then takes off. However, the pressure with which David is pressed into his leather seat is quite different from that of the big planes. It takes only a few seconds, then

the plane pulls its nose skyward and off it goes steeply upward. As the jet banked into the first right turn, David could see the green reeds of Lake Neusiedl below him.

When the pilot turns off the seatbelt signs, David can no longer hold anything in his seat. He visits the pilot in the cockpit and has everything explained to him in detail. He gets the impression that the pilot is even pleased to have a technically interested passenger on board for once, instead of those arrogant armchair farting bank board members. In the meantime, Thomas Prenninger prefers to be pampered by Isabel with salmon appetizers and champagne, but the cockpit would be much too small for two visitors anyway. After David has pestered the pilot with questions, he lets him do his work again and returns to his seat.

Meanwhile, they have already crossed the Alps and are just reaching the sea. David can make out the lagoon of Venice. So that's the famous capital of the Mediterranean down there!

In fact, Venice had made a fabulous rise for a domain-free city in recent years. Yet shortly after the economic collapse, the old lagoon city had shared the fate of many seaside cities: Far from the looming large domains and hard-pressed by the complete destruction of the tourism industry, the situation initially seemed hopeless. Many of the inhabitants were faced with the alternative of either earning their living as fishermen in the future or leaving their homes. The Venetians did not fare any better than any other domainless seafarers. Until they came up with the ingenious idea of exploiting a crucial weakness of the global domain system:

All river domains - large or small - have one common characteristic: they have no sea access due to the natural watersheds that form their boundaries! Or more precisely: They have a point-like sea access at the place where their primary river flows into the sea. The rest of the coastlines are domain-free. For example, the Danube-Adriatic Sea watershed runs parallel to the Adriatic coastline in large parts. On the watershed you can see the sea in many places! Nevertheless, the Danube domain, by definition, has no access to the Adriatic Sea. On the other

hand, the domainless places on the coast are located on small streams that pour into the sea after only a few kilometers. After the state of Croatia disintegrated, the territories east of the watershed oriented themselves towards the rising Danube domain. The coastal towns, on the other hand, sank into insignificance. The Venetians took advantage of this power vacuum! Within a few years, countless impoverished towns on the Adriatic united under the leadership of Venice to form the "New Venetian Republic". Trade relations were established and a common monetary system was established. When cross-domain trade began to flourish again, Venice was there first as the representative of the Adriatic riparians and soon after as the representative of the entire Mediterranean coast. But the really big business began with the return of mass tourism. The large domains had regained enormous economic power, but the wealthy population was foolishly confronted with the fact that they could not take a beach vacation on their own territory. Travel agencies and tourism industry quickly re-emerged. But these needed reliable contractual partners and legal security in the vacation regions, which the independent domainless small communities could not offer them. All this ultimately led to the fact that today almost all Mediterranean tourism is controlled by the Venetians. The flag of the Venetian lion flies in every resort from Gibraltar to Haifa, and the Doge's Palace of Venice is the control center for this newly created economic empire.

It's been two years since David last took a break from work. With his girlfriend at the time, Alexandra, he spent two weeks on an all-inclusive vacation in a hotel complex near Dubrovnik. Fourteen hot days and thirteen hot nights! As he now looks down on the glassy sea from a great height, he is overcome by wanderlust. He resolves to go straight to the travel agency and book a vacation as soon as this crazy project is completed.

And while he's thinking about it, he doesn't even notice that the hum of the Learjet has become much quieter.

*»Gentlemen, we will be arriving at John Paul Two Airport in Fiumicino in fifteen minutes. Please fasten your seat belts and put your seat backs in the upright position!« announces the flight attendant with a friendly smile.*

Before the pilot prepares to land, he takes another lap over the city. David's nose is virtually glued to the window pane. Many of the sights he has only seen in photos are now directly below him. St. Peter's Square, the Cathedral, Castel Sant'Angelo, the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, Villa Borghese, countless domes and churches and, last but not least, the meandering brown ribbon of the Tiber River. David is fascinated. The window pane of the airplane turns into a magic glass ball for him. It opens up to him a vision of a scene from a time long past. Out there, time seems to have stood still.

Reality quickly catches up with him, however, when he leaves the plane after landing. He had never experienced such an arrival at the airport. No sooner has the Learjet reached its parking position than a black minibus with tinted windows speeds up. The two dark figures getting out of the van could easily have been in any mafia movie. Black suit, black shoes, sunglasses, gold chain, pomade in their hair and three-day beards. When David and Thomas Prenninger have said goodbye to the crew and left the plane, the older of the two greets them in a rather unfriendly tone:

*»Buongiorno signori, are you Mr. Prenninger and Jonas from Vienna?«*

*»Si señor!« David's boss replies in bad Spanish.*

*»Please get into our car. We will take you to the Vatican.«*

As soon as everyone has taken their seats and closed the doors, the minibus speeds off. But not in the direction of the arrival terminal, as David would have expected, but directly to the airport exit. The heavily armed soldier at the gate is already opening the barrier when he sees the van approaching from a distance. Before they know it, they have left the airport and are on the highway.

David is beginning to find the whole situation somehow threatening. Their companions don't speak a word during the entire trip. Instead, they spend the entire time intensively examining the surroundings. On the center console, to the right of the driver's seat, David sees a metal holder. The two submachine guns mounted in it speak their own language. The highway also seems unnatural. Far and wide, apart from them, there is no other vehicle and not a soul to be seen. This only changes when they reach the first suburbs. Here, the streets slowly become busier. But not by car traffic, but by horse-drawn vehicles and now and then a motorcycle. The houses at the roadside seem neglected and are partly even dilapidated. The whole scenery is in stark contrast to the postcard idyll that David had pictured from the plane. The closer they get to the city center, the more people there are on the streets. The driver now honks frequently to get a clear path through the maze of pedestrians, cyclists and carts. David can't make out a single friendly face out there. As soon as people see the approaching minibus, it seems to him as if they want to annihilate him with their gazes. While crossing an intersection, a dog suddenly jumps in front of their vehicle. The driver can no longer avoid it and catches the animal with the front right fender. David flinches when he hears the bang of the impact and the shrieking scream of the animal they hit. The driver, however, only mumbles an incomprehensible "Cagnaccio misero!" and continues his journey at an accelerated pace, while his companion nervously places his left hand on the submachine gun.

David and his boss look at each other helplessly. They had imagined the airport transfer to be more of a sightseeing tour than the horror trip they are currently experiencing. When they finally see the large dome of St. Peter's Basilica appear in front of them, they both breathe an audible sigh of relief. Now it can't be very far to their destination. And indeed, shortly thereafter, they reach the border of the Vatican City State. Or rather, they reach the extremely secure breach in the wall that insurmountably separates the Vatican from the city of Rome. The heavily armed checkpoint is much more precise about access control than his colleague at

the airport. He meticulously reads the pass handed to him by the driver. Then he briefly climbs inside the minibus and makes sure that there are really only four people inside. After he is sure that everything is okay he returns to his control booth and briefly disappear into it. The two large metal bollards that have reliably prevented any passage so far begin to flash and sink into the roadway. After a few seconds, the lane is clear and the journey can continue.

Behind the wall, a different world begins, and David feels safe again. The driver steers the car through a small avenue, at the end of which is a large hotel. A forest of flagpoles stands in front of the entrance, on which David sees countless flags that are unfamiliar to him waving in the wind, in addition to the familiar flags of the major domains. The car stops directly in front of the hotel entrance. Above the large revolving doors, "Hotel Villa Medici" is written in gold-colored letters. The driver accompanies David and Thomas Prenninger to the reception desk and helps them with the check-in formalities. Then he briefly explains the rest of the day's schedule to them:

*»You can go to your rooms now and freshen up a bit. At six o'clock you are expected in the conference area of the hotel. Room Fatima.«*

After this terse announcement, he says goodbye and disappears. David looks at his boss, somewhat perplexed.

*»Do you know where the conference area is?«*

*»I think somewhere behind the reception desk. We now have just under an hour. I suggest we meet here at five to six and then set out together to find Fatima.«*

*»All right!« says David.*

Then they take the elevator to the 8th floor and move into their suites.

## Bike tour

Salvatore is unaware of the attack on Gianna. After saying goodbye to her, he goes home and eats a snack. Then he gets his bicycle from the cellar to go to Guiseppe Manzoni.

It's a beautiful day for a bike ride. The temperatures are bearable and there is a fresh sea breeze from the coast blowing through the streets of Rome. It is quiet in the narrow streets of Trastevere. Only the children on their way home from school breathe a little life into the idyllic scenery. The vegetable woman on the street corner greets him kindly as he drives by:

»*Ciao Salvatore! Is the roving reporter on two wheels again?*«

»*Ciao Antonia! I'm training for the Giro d'Italia!*«

In history class at his school, Salvatore had learned that this bicycle race was once said to have led across the entire Apennine Peninsula. Without border controls at the domain boundaries - simply unimaginable! Today, there is an impassable fence on the southern edges of the Po domain, which is supposed to prevent any uncontrolled entry from the very beginning. The thought of a united Italy from the island of Sicily to the great watershed in the Alps is as unreal to Salvatore as the thought of a woman as pope running things in the Vatican. The wealthy north is fencing itself off with all its might from the poor dwarf domains of the south. No more thought of the former proud nation, with its green-white-red tricolor. Green as the color of nature, white for the Alpine glaciers and red for the blood spilled in the wars. Yes - blood was always abundantly spilled on the soil of good old Italia. Seen in this light, the flag of the city of Rome should actually be brown-red-black! Brown for the dirty broth of the Tiber, red of course also for the blood spilled here no less and finally black for the color of the robes, whose wearers dictate life in the city.

Salvatore only awakens from his gloomy world of thoughts when he reaches the Porta Portese. This is where his home quarter ends and the Ponte Sublicio leads across to the other side of the Tiber. But before he crosses the bridge, he decides to take a look at the large market behind the

Porta Portese. No sooner has he ridden his bicycle through the large archway than he finds himself in the middle of the hustle and bustle. Salvatore loves this market. Every day except Sunday - another Vatican dictate - the market is open from sunrise to sunset. There is almost nothing that is not available here. If not always officially, it's usually by discreet request. Salvatore pushes his bike between the merchants' stalls and curiously examines the goods on offer. At a stand for electronic devices, his eye falls on an old cell phone. He has seen this emblem with the bitten apple before. No sooner has the dealer noticed his interest than he is already loudly praising the device:

*»Original Mela, lots of apps!«*

*»Is it possible to make a phone call with it?« Salvatore asks, more in jest.*

*»Of course Signore! Best voice quality with 7G and Etsch.«*

*»What's the price?«*

*»Only 5000 Roman lire.«*

Salvatore nods and continues walking. He's sure that this old piece of equipment couldn't work on the Roman cellular network. Even the newer models usually have no reception. The Roman telephone company can barely get the landline phones to work halfway reliably. Nevertheless, many Romans find it chic to walk around with such a nostalgic cell phone dummy. In an article on the Internet, Salvatore once read that the manufacturer of these devices had moved its headquarters to Pittsburgh<sup>8</sup> shortly before the economic crash. Whether this is true can at least be doubted. At that time, a lot of so-called fake news was spread. In any case, it is a fact that the majority of the development engineers at that time work as farmhands on the apple plantations in Cupertino<sup>9</sup> today.

After Salvatore has discovered this and that curiosity, he thinks it is about time to continue his bike tour. As he pushes his bike through the

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8 Capital of the giant North American domain of Mississippi. Drained via the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio and Mississippi rivers into the Gulf of Mexico

9 Fruit-growing region in the domain-free former so-called Silicon Valley.



white marble arch of Porta Portese, he leaves the the market behind him and continues his ride in the direction of the Tiber. He doesn't have to go far before the acrid stench of the lazily flowing river hits his nose. He pedals hard to escape the invisible cloud of garbage and feces as quickly as possible. Just a few meters after the bridge, however, he can breathe deeply again and as he rides along Via Marmorata on the wooded slopes of the Aventine, the air smells of flowers and fresh resin.

Soon he reaches the Cestius Pyramid, towering in brilliant white. The Roman tribune Gaius Cestius had it built shortly before the birth of Christ as his personal tomb. The Romans have always been a fashion-conscious people. Impressed by the monumental buildings in ancient Egypt, they wanted to do the same as the pharaohs there and also achieve a little immortality by building large pyramids. At least for Gaius Cestius this dream came true: His pyramid - thanks to several restorations - has survived the years almost undamaged and the name of the insignificant tribune, about whose life there is not much else worth telling, is unforgotten to this day.

When Salvatore sees the pyramid lying in front of him like this, he shudders a little. Not so long ago, this place was the scene of an unprecedented crime. Salvatore was a small child and Rome was still in the grip of anarchy as a result of the previous economic catastrophe. No one really knew what form of government would emerge from the general chaos in the long term. There were enthusiastic supporters and determined opponents for the most diverse ideas. The majority of Romans wanted to live again in a democratically governed, united Italy, with Rome as its capital again, of course. Soon, however, it became clear that the northern parts of old Italy had completely different ideas about the future and never again wanted to be patronized by Rome. As a result, ideas bubbled up in Rome as to which direction the political and economic journey should take. From the introduction of an empire in the old Roman tradition to a Marxist-Leninist communism in the style of the former Soviet Union, there was everything that people in need could think of. One of these revolutionary Roman masterminds of the time was a certain Luigi Piramidi. He was an ardent follower of the German domain theorist Karl Guggenmoser. Guggenmoser, in turn, had caused a worldwide sensation at the time with the presentation of his domain system. The

Romans, however, were initially very suspicious of the domain system, and for good reason: one only had to take a look at the map to see in which pitifully small river system the eternal cosmopolitan city of Rome would be located in the future! Luigi Piramidi and his five comrades-in-arms soon became the target of ridicule and scorn, but nevertheless held steadfastly to their convictions and continued to try to convince the inhabitants of Rome of the advantages of the domain system. Until one day they suddenly all disappeared from the scene. Their families reported the six men missing. At that time, however, there was no institution that could have done anything to clarify their fate. The mystery of the six was solved only two months later. An amateur archaeologist had noticed that the burial chamber of the Pyramid of Cestius had not been accessible for some time. Initially, he had assumed that the narrow entrance had been bricked up for reasons of monument protection. But when apparently no one seemed to know about such an action, the city's Revolutionary Council at the time gave the order to uncover the entrance to the pyramid's burial chamber. When the workers had torn down the brick barrier, they found the bodies of Luigi Piramidi and his comrades in the burial chamber. The six had apparently been walled in alive. The condition of their fingers clearly proved that they must have been desperately trying for days to get out of their dark prison. A large part of the population in the Tiber domain is convinced today: this cruel murder turned Luigi Piramidi and his fellow sufferers into martyrs and thus perhaps ultimately helped the domain system on the Tiber to achieve its breakthrough.

Salvatore averts his gaze from the pyramid to get his mind back on other things. After he has crossed the passage between the pyramid and the defiant Porta San Paolo, the busy Piazzale Ostiense opens up before him. From here on, the tranquility is over for the time being. The historic arterial road to Ostia is bustling with activity around the clock. Horse-drawn carts, motorcycles and even a few cars share the wide road, making cycling a real challenge. As Salvatore prepares to cross the street, he is suddenly approached by an attractive blonde:

*»Ciao Salvatore! Well, once again on the Via Ostiense on a secret mission? How are you?«*

He first has to look twice, then he remembers:

*»Yes hello Ivanka! Thank you for asking. Good! And yourself?  
How is the business going?«*

Gianna and Salvatore had made a video report about a year ago about street prostitution on Via Ostiense. Salvatore had been rather embarrassed at first. It was Gianna who had persuaded him to join in with the argument that "sex sells" and the prospect of increasing subscriber numbers for the video blog. At first it had not been so easy to get one of the ladies to cooperate. It was Ivanka, with her friendly and uncomplicated manner, who answered his questions in front of the camera. She candidly told her whole life story and let him share her private and street life with the camera for days - with all due discretion. Gianna was right in the end, of course. When they put the finished report online, it took less than seven days for the click rate of their video blog to quadruple. But even for Ivanka, who at forty was no longer the youngest in her trade, it had been worth it! In the following weeks she could hardly save herself from clients and had long thought about how she could pay back good Salvatore once.

*»Thanks, I'm fine too! We haven't seen each other for ages. Why don't you come to my house for a cup of coffee? Then you can tell me calmly what you have been up to lately!«*

She winks at him so clearly that any misinterpretation of this offer seems impossible. Salvatore briefly glances at his wristwatch. It's only a short distance from here to Guiseppe Manzoni's apartment. And it's still too early to find him playing bocce in the park. So he still has plenty of time to chat animatedly with Ivanka for a while.

In the meantime, however, the little Salvatore in his pants has already taken the decision away from him. He signals him clearly: »Go upstairs with her!«

Some things Salvatore doesn't let himself be told twice.

## Despair

Jan has now read through his father's sparse suicide note three times. The fourth time, all his dams burst. The tough facade that he had maintained with all his might in the last few hours relentlessly collapses in the familiar surroundings. Tears spring to his eyes and he begins to cry uninhibitedly, giving free rein to his emotions. His mother and sister are startled at first by the unfamiliar sight. Then they take him into their midst and try to comfort him. In the end, however, this only leads to all three of them sitting on the sofa crying and holding each other in their arms.

When they have calmed down a bit, Jan asks his mother:

*»Why did he do that. He should have seen that we have the hardest part behind us and that things are slowly looking up!«*

*»I don't know either,« his mother replies, still in a broken voice.  
»But I talked to the pastor yesterday, and he said that this suicide was unfortunately not an isolated case. Especially the men in Dad's age group would be currently quite often affected. He justified it with the fact that they had experienced as so-called baby boomer generation from birth only a constantly increasing prosperity. Solid vocational training, secure jobs, guaranteed pensions, family, cars, vacations, houses, the whole nine yards. If you worked hard enough, you were rewarded with even more prosperity and security. And suddenly all that is taken away from you.«*

*»But things are already starting to change for the better. He should have seen that!«*

*»The pastor said that it is the men of this generation, who are now at the end of their working lives, who consider themselves the biggest losers. Their professions will no longer be in demand in the foreseeable future, and if they are ever in demand again, they are definitely too old and have lost their way. Young people like you certainly have all doors open to them once again. For people of my generation, the stove is off.«*

*»But mom, you're already fully integrated back into life. What are you actually doing in your community service?«*

*»I'm working in the supermarket again. But not at the checkout like I used to, but at the merchandise counter, where people exchange their food stamps. My former store manager got me in there through connections.«*

*»Well, there you go again, with a good perspective. Why didn't Dad take you as an example?«*

*»Men obviously find it more difficult to simply accept social regression. In my case, it's not really a step backward at all. I was a poorly paid cashier before, and now I'm a poorly paid dispenser. I still see the same people and can talk to them about this and that as before. It was a different story with your father. He had a responsible job, earned a lot of money and could tell his people what to do. And then he had to come to terms with the fact that it's all over forever and that he'll have to work as a harvest helper in the future. That's quite a difference!«*

Jan thinks for a while about what his mother said. He tries to put himself in his father's shoes. Could a material loss for him justify such a drastic step? Probably not. But he also finds it hard to even get a concrete idea of material loss. Jan had never owned more than he could carry in his wallet. If he had lost it: Too bad, but not really too bad. For better or worse, he will have to come to terms with the fact that he will never know what really went on in his father's mind and what ultimately drove him to this desperate act.

If Peter Eckert were still alive now, he could certainly tell his son a few additional details from his last days. He would probably then understand him better. But unfortunately he takes the knowledge of the whole truth with him to the grave:

The total loss of assets was a bitter blow for him: all stocks, life insurance policies and pension claims worthless, the savings unreachable and later devalued by hyperinflation. The only things that remained were the loan

debts for the house with the bank and the registered land charge, which gave the bank the right to take the house away from them at any time if they could no longer meet their debt service.

But even more grueling was the past hungry winter. For weeks, father, mother and daughter had to endure freezing temperatures without sufficient food in their unheatable house. Peter Eckert had set out on his bicycle in search of food. Within a radius of 50 kilometers, he had canvassed almost every farm. In the end, he pedaled off more calories than the few foodstuffs he found contained any nutritional value.

When spring came, all three had gone on forage trips. Here, too, the success was very modest at the beginning. At first, Peter Eckert had had fundamental reservations about letting his seventeen-year-old daughter go off on her own. But then they had all been glad that this distributed strategy had allowed them to noticeably increase their success rate. Little by little, Anna even turned into the most successful food supplier in the family. Peter Eckert was really proud of his daughter and was pleased that, unlike him and his wife, she apparently struck the right chord with the farmers for opening the pantries. Until at some point it became clear to him in what way she had gotten hold of the things.

He only became aware of his boundless naiveté when he was approached on the street one evening by his drunken neighbor Günter Neubert. His daughter Julia was the same age as Anna and had attended the same school with her for years. In a slurred voice, he had asked him if he knew that the two girls could recently be found behind the train station on the baby prowl. At first, Peter Eckert simply wanted to leave the drunkard alone. But then he continued to talk to him: That Julia had confessed to him that Anna had received food from some dirty pig in exchange for sexual favors on one of her tours, that Anna had then confided in her friend Julia, that the two girls had then tried to help their starving families out of need and inexperience, that some guy had then promised them regular deliveries of goods if they would go on the street for him, and so on and so forth. For Peter Eckert, the world had finally collapsed that evening. As the

breadwinner of the family, he had already failed all along the line and now, through his boundless stupidity, he had also destroyed the future of his daughter.

The following night he had emptied the first bottle of his beloved whiskey collection. The next day, when he had slept off his hangover, his wife told him that their neighbor, Mr. Neubert, had shot himself in the forest. The following days Peter Eckert drank more and more and when his whiskey supply was exhausted, he went down to the cellar and put an agonizing end to his bleak life.

## **Fatima**

David's suite at the Hotel Villa Medici exceeds his expectations by orders of magnitude. Two rooms - living room and bedroom - with fine furniture, a huge bathroom with bathtub and separate shower, plus a balcony with a view of the Vatican gardens. Only the Wi-Fi could be faster. After David has checked his e-mails, he tests the shower. A cool, rich jet of massage falls on his back and awakens his spirits, tired from the journey. But when he pushes the lever on the mixer tap to the left, he probably does a bit too much. The water gets so hot that he jumps out of the shower as quickly as he can to avoid scalding himself. Meanwhile, the hot water continues to splash around, literally turning his bath into a Roman steam bath within seconds. Only with difficulty does he manage to turn the water off again. As he considers how to activate the ventilation, he sees a white cord hanging from a small box down into the bathtub. Maybe he can use it to turn on the fan. When he pulls on it, it also feels like he has flipped a switch; however, nothing does anything at all. He decides to give the shower another try and at least wash the shampoo out of his hair. No sooner has he closed the glass door of the shower again than the chambermaid is suddenly standing in his bathroom with her head high and red. She mumbles something about "SOS" in Italian and points to the white cord. David promises her to keep his hands off the thing in the future, but she's already gone.

By the time he gets dressed, it's already a quarter to six. David zaps through the programs on the large flat-screen TV and then takes the elevator down to the reception. Of course, his boss Thomas Prenninger doesn't appear in the lobby until six o'clock sharp. But he proudly announces:

*»I did some research. The hotel's conference center is back there. Come on!«*

Together they walk quickly down the long hallway. At a relatively small room is indeed written "Fatima". When they enter, three people are already waiting for them: a young man in a casual outfit, a very well-dressed middle-aged man - and a priest. The latter takes the floor in perfect German:

*»Good evening gentlemen! My name is Alberto Bonelli. On behalf of the Vatican Bank, may I welcome you here in Rome. I hope you had a good journey?«*

*»Thank you very much. Everything worked out wonderfully!«*  
*replies Thomas Prenninger.*

*»May I introduce you to my colleagues? The gentleman on my right is Sergio Giocondo. As project manager, Sergio will be your future contact for all coordination issues. And the young man to my left is Enzo Agnesi. Enzo is a software specialist and works in our data center.«*

*»Very pleasant. My name is Thomas Prenninger. I have been appointed by the Board of our central bank as project manager for this important and promising project. I am leading the twenty-person team that will be working on the technical implementation of our cooperation agreement. The young man I have brought with me is David Jonas, one of our many database specialists.«*

David already knows enough of his boss's arrogant posturing, so he hardly listens to any more of the managerial gobbledygook. The rest of this first meeting follows the usual rituals: First, the language of conversation switches from German to English. After the hierarchy within the two



parties has been sufficiently clarified, all participants sign an NDA<sup>10</sup>. Then the two project leaders extensively present their prepared slide sets on the huge LED screen of the meeting room. David has to fight the emerging tiredness. He is not the least interested in the whole topic. The Danube Domain and the Vatican City State had adopted a bilateral clearing agreement on mutual cash flow, as well as foreign exchange and securities trading, a few months ago. Now it was a matter of technically linking the Vatican bank with the existing central clearing house in London. In David's opinion, this was actually a trivial matter that could have been handled from home - in the worst case with a few video conferences. But then the project managers would not have been able to demonstrate their importance and indispensability.

When the Clearinghouse was founded in London five years ago, it was a completely different challenge. At the time, the metropolis on the Thames had emerged as the ideal location after much toing and froing. This was probably due in no small part to the fact that Britain had maneuvered its way through the global economic chaos relatively smoothly. The British had distanced themselves from Europe and the euro in good time and had therefore been reasonably spared the catastrophic effects of the collapse of the monetary and economic union. As in most islands, river domain formation was not a real alternative in Britain. Instead, the three sovereign states of Ireland, Scotland and Little Britain emerged, the latter from the merger of England and Wales. And since the infrastructure for a successful banking system was already in place in the City of London, this location made the running in the question of where the future European financial center should be located.

David feels confirmed in his assessment when he sees his colleague Enzo yawning. However, the mutual presentation marathon drags on for over an hour. Then Reverend Bonelli finally takes the floor:

*»Gentlemen, I think we have heard enough today about the challenging tasks that lie ahead. I suggest we let work rest for*

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10 NDA: Non-Disclosure Agreement

*today. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Sergio has reserved a meeting room at the Apostolic Palace for all day tomorrow. He and his team will confer there with you, Mr. Prenninger, about project planning for the next few months. Enzo will take Mr. Jonas to his server room and show him the computers there. For tomorrow evening, we have come up with something very special for you: Be our guests in an ancient Roman tavern. I don't want to reveal more today. Originally we had planned this event for tonight. However, the experience of previous visits has shown that a concentrated work on the following day was unfortunately not always possible as we would have wished. Therefore, we are sure you will understand that we have adjusted the order of the agenda items somewhat. Per aspera ad astra - or as my monsignor always freely translates - first the work, then the pleasure! Tomorrow morning, at nine o'clock, after breakfast, you will be picked up in the hotel lobby. I wish you a restful stay and a pleasant night's rest.«*

## **Boccia**

After the unexpected fling with Ivanka, Salvatore gets back on his bike and sets off for the nearby Piazza Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The square bears the name of the most famous sculptor of the Roman Baroque. Taste or not: countless fountains and churches in the city are decorated with his detailed sculptures. Today, his most famous work is undoubtedly the Fountain of the Four Domains in Piazza Navona. Just last year, the Romans celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of this grandiose masterpiece. Bernini was far ahead of his time: on the fountain, he symbolically carved the four important river systems of the Danube, Ganges, Nile and Río de la Plata in stone, thus artistically anticipating the definition of the most important continental domains. Even if Salvatore has no great interest in the artistic work of this sculptor. The political foresight of the man fascinates him.

When Salvatore reaches the small piazza, he first takes a short walk around the park in the middle. A nice residential area is here! Lots of nice villas with lots of green around them. It's certainly a good place to live. In the middle of the park, Salvatore discovers the bocce court, where four

older men are having a heated dispute about the course of the game. Salvatore parks his bicycle on one of the park benches and approaches the men:

*»Good evening, gentlemen. I am looking for Guiseppe Manzoni. As far as I know, he regularly plays bocce here.«*

*One of the old men answers: »Good evening, young man. Beppe has not been here for a few days. We miss him already. Probably has a lot on his mind at the moment.«*

*»Can you perhaps tell me where he lives? Maybe I'll run into him at home.«*

*»Just up ahead, at the slightly larger house on the corner. Try your luck and tell him that he should show up here again! Otherwise we'll revoke his membership in our club!«*

The four men shake with laughter, but then quickly delve back into their game. Salvatore gets on his bike and rides the few meters to the house the older man had pointed to. A two-story corner house with a nicely clinkered facade. Not as nice as the villas directly adjacent to the park, but by no means as shabby as the house in Trastevere where Salvatore lives with his flatmates.

He chains his bicycle to a streetlight and goes through the open entrance into the stairwell. A sticker on one of the mailboxes says "Manzoni". So he's already in the right place. According to the arrangement of the mailboxes, Guiseppe lives on the second floor. Salvatore looks around to see if anyone is watching him and then slowly climbs the stairs. There are three apartments on the second floor. At the bell of the middle apartment, the name "G. Manzoni" catches his eye again. He presses the bell button and thinks he hears a soft noise coming from the apartment. He waits, but nothing happens. After a while, he rings the bell a second time, this time for a little longer. Again, nothing happens. This time, however, Salvatore thinks he has noticed a darkening of the small glass lens on the door

peephole. On the off chance, he calls out loudly in the direction of the door:

*»Hey Beppe! It's me. Your friend Salvatore. Open up! I know you're home!«*

The reaction is not long in coming. He hears a chain being removed from the door and the key turning twice in the lock. Then the door opens and a frightened Guiseppe Manzoni looks him in the eyes.

*»Salvatore! Be quiet and come in!«*

Guiseppe pulls him into the apartment, closes the door thoroughly again, leads him into his living room and asks him to take a seat on the wide leather sofa in front of the window. Before sitting down, Salvatore takes a quick look out the window. It faces directly onto the piazza. From up here, he can again see the old men playing bocce in the park. After Salvatore has taken a seat on the soft sofa, his gaze wanders around the large room. All respect! Guiseppe obviously has taste and money. The entire furnishing looks very noble and dignified. Massive furniture made of dark precious wood, thick carpets with filigree oriental patterns, two floor lamps with colorfully printed fabric shades and porcelain feet. Upstairs, in the center of the high ceiling, hangs an expansive chandelier made of glass crystal. But Salvatore is most fascinated by the huge flat-screen TV, which, however, looks somewhat out of place on the antique dresser.

Guiseppe notices Salvatore's irritated look and says sheepishly:

*»All heirlooms that my wife brought into the marriage.«*

But Salvatore has not come to talk about the style of furniture. He finally wants to know from Guiseppe why La Città has so far not mentioned the bribery scandal with a word.

Guiseppe begins to tell about the events of the past days:

*»Salvatore, you must have stirred up a hornet's nest with these papers! I have never experienced anything like this in my entire professional life. After you left, I went to my editor-in-chief and*

*showed them to him. I told him that they had been in an envelope in our house mailbox and that the envelope had been addressed to me personally without a return address. Anyway, my boss took the papers and showed them to the publishing management. The next day, he came back to me all upset. He impressed upon me that these documents had never existed and threatened me with immediate dismissal if I did not forget these papers. To back it all up, he banned me from the business editorial department until further notice and transferred me to the gossip colleagues!«*

*»Then you must know the article in today's edition about the alleged suicide of the two priests from the Vatican!«*

*»Yes, of course! That was my first work in my new professional environment, so to speak. Pretty scary, I tell you! I was there on location with our photographer and experienced the investigations.«*

Salvatore thinks for a moment about how far he can share his knowledge with Guiseppe without dragging Gianna into it. Then he leans forward on the sofa toward his interlocutor and speaks in a low, meaningful voice:

*»Guiseppe listen: I have it on good authority that it was one of those two dead priests who smuggled those papers out of the Vatican!«*

Guiseppe needs a few seconds to be able to evaluate this information correctly. Then he becomes even paler than he already is.

*»Salvatore, do you know what you are saying? If this priest didn't kill himself, but had to die because of the release of these papers, then we are all in mortal danger as accomplices!«*

*»What makes you think he couldn't have killed himself?«*  
*Salvatore asks with an artificial expression of cluelessness.*

*»We all had the impression at the bridge that something was wrong. Listen. The ropes the two were dangling from were attached to metal hooks that had been doveled into the masonry of the bridge. Would you use the percussion drill to set some dowels first, if you wanted to hang yourself out of desperation?*

*And then only the suicide note! The wording was simply sent to our editorial office by e-mail. No one can judge whether this is authentic or not. With clean journalistic work, this newspaper article has absolutely nothing to do. For it it was edited however three times by the publishing house management, until we were allowed to give it then to the printer. That stinks to high heaven!«*

*»And what should we do now?« Salvatore wants to know.*

*»If you value your life, you won't do anything there! Tell that to your informant or whoever you got the stuff from!«*

*»I will think about it. In any case, I would be very grateful if you would continue to keep my name a secret!«*

*»You can count on me. I think they believed the story about the anonymous letter. After all, it often happens that someone sends us information this way. But we should avoid being seen together in the future! It's also best if you don't leave the house until it's dark. I would have there also a good bottle of red wine in the cellar, with which we can pass the time until then!«*

*»Thanks for the offer, but I'm there by bike and I definitely don't want to ride back to Trastevere in the dark.«*

Guiseppe continues to worry that Salvatore might be seen by the wrong people at his house in daylight. On the other hand, of course, he knows that it wouldn't be a good idea to roam the streets of Rome at night on a bicycle. Too many people have had to pay for that with their lives - or at least with the loss of everything they had with them. So the two say goodbye and Salvatore pedals off to get home before nightfall.

## **Funeral service**

Shortly before eleven o'clock, the small mourning congregation has gathered in the town church with the adjacent cemetery. Of Peter Eckert's family, only his wife Elvira and his two children Jan and Anna have come. Peter Eckert's parents are both long gone. None of his siblings are present.

Peter Eckert has an older brother who lives in Hamburg and a younger sister who emigrated to Sweden with her family a few years ago. Mrs. Eckert had tried in vain to reach both of them by telephone. She had also sent them a telegram. So far, however, no response had arrived. But even if they had received the message in time, a short-term journey would certainly have failed due to the lack of transport connections.

So the funeral service for Jan's father takes place in the smallest family circle. The pastor has gathered the parish choir to provide musical accompaniment for the ceremony. In Jan's opinion, he also finds the right words. Comforting for the bereaved, thought-provoking for the congregation, and discreet enough not to go too directly into the tragic circumstances of the death.

Only a few of Peter Eckert's former colleagues have come. Most have probably not even heard of his death. Information is still largely passed on from mouth to mouth. Both local and national newspapers have not yet resumed their operations.

One of the biggest problems currently affecting all burials taking place is the acute lack of resources. There are simply too few coffins to bury all the deceased conventionally. Peter Eckert actually wanted to be cremated after his death. At the moment, however, only burials in the ground can be carried out in most German cities because of the lack of energy. And here, too, the coffin is reused as a reusable item. In practice, this means that the dead person lies in a beautifully decorated coffin until the funeral service. For the burial, however, one has pragmatically followed the Muslim burial ritual. The body is wrapped in a sheet and lowered into the grave on a plain wooden board. The coffin is then cleaned and returns for the next funeral. In the past, the lobby of the funeral homes had successfully resisted this type of burial for a long time, despite brisk demand. Finally it feared sensitive losses of turnover by the omission of the coffin sales and the auxiliary equipment belonging to it. Due to the current circumstances, however, the new type of burial has no alternative and is practiced everywhere.

Against all odds, Peter Eckert is placed in the ground with dignity after two hours. The pastor and the mourners condole with the family at the open grave. Afterwards, everyone goes home again. Most people do not have the means for invitations to a joint lunch or for coffee and cake. And so, after the funeral, the Eckert family also goes back alone to their family home and spends the rest of the day in a small circle.

Jan stays with his mother and sister Anna for another week. He helps them as much as he can with the necessary visits to the authorities. Compared to earlier times, there are not many of them anyway. The registry offices function as usual and meticulously register every birth and death. The probate courts, however, have not yet resumed their operations, and a certificate of inheritance is a relic from an earlier world.

When Jan feels that his family can manage without him, he decides to go back to Cologne. Several times he goes to the station and tries to catch one of the sporadic trains. The fourth time, he succeeds. After three hours of endless train travel in a completely overcrowded regional train, he finally arrives at Cologne's main station and half an hour later he is back at his apartment.

## **Big Data**

As expected, the night's rest and breakfast at the Hotel Villa Medici left nothing to be desired. David and his boss have met in the lobby shortly before nine o'clock and are waiting to be picked up by their hosts. They don't have to wait long, as Reverend Bonelli comes in through the revolving door:

*»Buongiorno Signori! I hope you had a wonderful night!«*

After a brief exchange of pleasantries with Thomas Prenninger, the priest gives the signal to leave.

*»I hope it's all right with you that we take a little morning walk. Everything here in the Vatican is actually within walking distance. That's why I didn't request a shuttle service.«*



David has nothing against a little digestive walk. But he doesn't quite know how to interpret the expression on his boss's face. The priest leads the two out of the hotel, directly into the Vatican Gardens. After they left the hotel lobby they find themselves in an oasis of peace. The way leads them first along a wide gravel path lined with palm trees. To their left is a wide lawn with a few flower beds. Two gardeners are taking advantage of the still pleasant morning temperature there for their sweaty work. On the right, a random collection of pines and cypresses provides some shade and a varied landscape. At a rock garden, the priest follows a small path that leads them past low hedges and large holm oaks, directly to the massive rear of St. Peter's Basilica. David marvels at the enormous size of the dome perched atop the already gigantic structure. When they reach the end of the garden, her companion says:

*»We can go briefly through the Sistina. It's not open to pilgrims at this hour!«*

David and his boss look at each other helplessly and shrug their shoulders, but then follow the priest into the inconspicuous building in front of which they are standing. After a few meters, a control post stands in their way with a grim look on his face. When he recognizes their leader, however, he greets them kindly and lets all three pass. As they step through the door, David first recognizes only that they are in a rather large hall. The small windows below the ceiling don't let in much light. Besides, his eyes are not yet used to the darkness of the room. However, when the priest turns on the lights, David thinks he is in a gallery. The walls and ceilings are decorated with paintings almost all over. These are probably the famous Vatican Museums, David thinks. He pulls out his smartphone and takes a picture of the comical ceiling painting with the old man pointing crossly at a lounging naked man. Somewhere he has seen this motif before. David resolves to run the picture through his image recognition program at home, so that he can perhaps find out more about it.

But they don't have much time for this tourist intermezzo. Their companion leads them out again on the other side of the hall into the

adjoining building. Then they crisscross, up and down the stairs, so that David soon loses his bearings. His boss seems to feel the same way and both are happy when they finally reach their destination. All respect! This small, magnificent room is obviously the meeting room that was mentioned yesterday. Among the ten people present, David immediately recognizes yesterday's interlocutors Sergio Giocondo and Enzo Agnesi. Who the other people are, however, unfortunately remains a mystery to David, because Enzo immediately jumps up and asks him to accompany him.

*»Good morning Mister Jonas. Are you so kind to join me in my office?«*

David nods and follows him through a few more sections of the Vatican building maze. During their march through the corridors and staircases of the Apostolic Palace, the two agree to address each other by their first names. Enzo apologizes to David for his bumpy English and takes the opportunity to tell him a little about his background. He was born and went to school in Martigny on the upper reaches of the Rhone. He had grown up there bilingual - with French and Italian. Later, he had studied computer science in the domain capital of Geneva, taking a few English courses along the way. Through a cousin who had enlisted in the Swiss Guard, he had come to the Vatican and for the past four years, together with eight colleagues, has been in charge of the small state's various IT systems.

When they reach the wing of the Vatican Bank, David has more the impression of being in a prison than in an administrative building. They now also descend to the basement via a spiral staircase.

*»Welcome to our IT office!« says Enzo as he leads David into a large room where five men are staring spellbound at their computer screens. »Wake up guys, this is David from Vienna.«*

The five briefly take their eyes off their monitors, greet their guest briefly, and then return to their work.

*»Let's go to our study booth. There we can talk without disturbing my colleagues.«*

Enzo leads David down another floor to a tiny chamber. The furnishings correspond to the retreats David is familiar with from many IT companies: a desk, two office chairs, a computer, two monitors, keyboard, mouse and telephone. Except that the ambience reminds him more of a prison than a high-tech workplace.

*»In former times this room was a dungeon!« Enzo grins, as if he could read David's mind.*

Too bad that Thomas Prenninger isn't down here with him. The thought of locking up his IT slaves in something like this would certainly please him.

David and Enzo take a seat at the desk and Enzo logs on to the Vatican Bank's intranet. When David asks him if he really wants to show him the server room, as announced yesterday by the Reverend Bonelli, he just wavers wearily.

*»Are you really interested in our hardware?«*

David grins. The local bosses obviously don't have a clue about the technology that keeps their store running either. They probably don't care either. In any case, he's glad to have found a technical contact in Enzo who's on a par with him. They both think about how they can make the most of the day. David hands Enzo a memory stick with the protocol description of the Clearinghouse software. After Enzo tests the stick for viruses and finds it okay, they open the documents and David explains to Enzo in detail which components would have to be re-implemented in the Vatican Bank software. Enzo listens with interest and also seems to quickly understand where the critical points are.

*»Do you want to take a look at our current database scheme?« asks Enzo.*

*»Sure, that would be helpful!«*

Enzo suggests that David take a look at the records of the existing transfer system. This old system is to be replaced by the new software. The software already in use is the easiest way for David to see where the sticking points would be in a new development. Enzo logs into the database and scrolls a few records across the screen.

*»These are some money transfer transactions from Vatican to Vienna.«*

David sees the records of all the money transfers from the last month scroll across the screen in reverse chronological order; the newest first, the oldest last. The database schema does not seem to have any special features. David is sure by now that there are no major technical challenges to be overcome here. A routine job.

*»What means subject watercleanup?« Enzo asks him.*

*»Watercleanup? No idea! Maybe a bad translation for water purification.«*

Even as David answers, his breath catches in his throat. In fact, this term is written in the intended use of some of these data records. David immediately remembers where he last saw this strange word: In the data sets, the knowledge of which cost his friend and colleague Klaus Baumann his life! Only the evening before the flight to Rome, David had briefly looked at the data records again. There were dozens of transfers, whose origin could not be traced, but where this strange word was always to be found in the purpose of use!

*»Do you want a printout of our database scheme?« asks Enzo.*

*»Of course, that would be helpful,« David stammers as if in a trance.*

*»Just a moment. The printer is in our office. I will be back in a minute!«*

Enzo leaves the small room and climbs the spiral staircase to his office, toasting a printout of the database structure. David, meanwhile, remains

seated in front of the two monitors, thunderstruck. Can this be a coincidence? Never, never! He glances at the spiral staircase. There is no sign of Enzo or his colleagues. Since he's already in the database, he simply can't pass up this opportunity. In a matter of seconds, he types in an SQL<sup>11</sup> query:

```
SELECT COUNT(*) FROM transfers WHERE  
subject='watercleanup' 724
```

Unbelievable! A total of seven hundred and twenty-four transfers were made from the Vatican Bank with the word "watercleanup" in the reason for the transfer! David enters a few more SQL commands. In doing so, he finds that the transfers had gone to a wide variety of European domains: Danube, Rhine, Elbe, Weser, Rhone, Dnieper, Don, Volga, Po, Seine, Loire, the list goes on and on! Even the sender always seems to be the same, even if it is not very meaningful: SM. Only two letters. Sado-Maso? San Marino? Super Mario? No idea. Maybe by rummaging around in the database some more, I could find out something about this abbreviation. But David runs out of time. He hears voices from the top of the staircase. Enzo has probably already finished printing out his document and is on his way down. If he catches him rummaging around in the database, the shit will hit the fan! David clears the screen and quickly repeats the command that Enzo had last entered. Hopefully he won't notice anything!

But David seems to be lucky. When Enzo returns with five printed A4 pages, his mind seems to be somewhere else anyway.

*»I have talked with my supervisor. He allowed me to give you this document.«*

David takes the printout to his documents. He thanks him and assures Enzo that these documents will certainly be helpful for the implementation of the project. Then he suggests that they take a short break in the fresh air. Enzo agrees and offers to show David the Vatican courtyards while taking

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a cigarette break outside. He, too, somehow no longer feels like delving into any database structures.

What Enzo doesn't tell is that he just had to listen to a huge lecture from his supervisor. How he could be so careless as to leave the foreign guest sitting unattended at a bank computer! If something like that happened again, he would have to face disciplinary consequences! »These Vaticanists are really paranoid,« Enzo thinks to himself as he climbs the stairs to daylight with David.

Meanwhile, his supervisor has logged onto the database server's administration console and is examining the database queries of the last ten minutes. His expression freezes when he sees the SQL queries that have just left their mark in the log file. For a minute, he considers his options. But he has only one alternative, even if it could cost him his job. He opens a new "security incident" on the IT intranet site. He describes objectively and soberly what information the visitor from Vienna has just spied out in the Vatican database without authorization. When he sends his report, several e-mails with the highest priority level and the subject "Security Alert" are automatically sent: To the Vatican Bank's security officer, to Monsignor Scarelli and to his private secretary Alberto Bonelli.

## **Escapee**

Gianna had not left the apartment for three days after the attack. Her face was still swollen and her maltreated eye changed its color daily; from red to violet and currently to a slightly bluish color. For three days and nights she had pondered over what to do now - and still she had not come to a decision. Salvatore had visited her every day. The first time was on the evening of the robbery, when he had returned from his visit to Guiseppe Manzoni just before nightfall. He had been as shocked at the sight of Gianna's battered face as Marco and Maria had been before. For hours they had pondered whether to let others in on their dangerous knowledge or to follow the advice of Salvatore's journalist friend and leave the whole affair alone.

After three days of indecision, Gianna can no longer stand this back and forth. She decides to go to her parents and take them into her confidence. After all, they themselves are in danger, if she correctly remembers the threatening parting words of the brutal thug.

In front of the mirror in the hallway, she tries to bring her appearance into a halfway inconspicuous state. She puts on sunglasses to cover the shiner on her eye. With a bandana, she covers, as best she can, the swollen areas on her face. Since Marco and Maria are out of the house, she writes them a few lines. Then she carefully locks the apartment door, which Marco has repaired in the meantime, and leaves the house.

Thank goodness her parents live just a few houses away. Gianna has not the slightest desire to meet a neighbor now and have to make up a tall tale. But her hopes are abruptly dashed when she walks through the front door of her parents' house and suddenly finds herself standing in front of the old Signora Sabatini.

*»Signorina Gianna! We haven't seen each other for ages! Are you going to visit your parents?«*

*»Yes, Signora Sabatini. How are you and your husband? I hope well?«*

*»Well, it goes like this. Neither of us is getting any younger. But Gianna, what have you done to your face? Did you have an accident?«*

*»Oh, it's nothing bad. I slipped on an oil slick with my Vespa and fell. Unfortunately, I wasn't wearing a helmet. But thank God nothing much happened. Just a few bruises. And the Vespa has fortunately also remained intact.«*

*»Then I wish you a speedy recovery and please take better care of yourself in the future! Your poor parents will be worried for sure!«*

*»I will do that. Goodbye Signora Sabatini and give my regards to your husband!«*

Gianna hurries up the stairs before she runs into the next neighbor. Most of them are knowing her almost since she was a child, and they're usually not as easy to get rid of as the old Mrs. Sabatini was just now. Gianna rings the doorbell of her parents' apartment. It takes a while, then her father opens the door. Before he can say anything, Gianna scurries into the apartment and quickly closes the door behind her.

*»Gianna! It's a surprise to see you visiting your old father. But what happened? What do you look like?«*

*»Greetings daddy! Is mommy home too?«*

*»No, she went to see a customer who wanted to have a dress made. She probably won't be back for another two hours.«*

*»Dad, I need to talk to you! I'm in trouble!«*

*»Well, come on down to the "Gute Stube" and tell me what you've been up to again.«*

Gianna always finds it funny when her father openly reveals his German roots and throws around such funny terms as the one for the living room. At the moment, however, she has no sense for linguistic quibbles. Her father's sense of humor also vanishes abruptly when she takes a seat on the sofa and removes both her sunglasses and her headscarf.

*»My God, child! What happened to you? Who did this to you?«*

*»Dad, the other day when you were having dinner with us in the shared flat, I told you about a stranger who had arranged to meet me at the Angel Bridge and then didn't show up.«*

*»Yes, I remember exactly. You promised me that you would let us know if he contacted you again!«*

*»I know daddy,« Gianna replies with a lowered gaze. »In the meantime, unfortunately, quite a lot has happened that you don't know about yet.«*



And again Gianna has to start all over again with the storytelling. It takes a good half hour until she has relieved her guilty conscience and let her father in on all the details of the past days. He listens to everything wordlessly, without interrupting his daughter's torrent of words. When Gianna is finally finished, he remains sitting wordlessly on the sofa for a while, thinking.

*»What did you say was the name of the journalist to whom Salvatore handed these documents?«*

*»Guiseppe Manzoni,« Gianna replies.*

*»I was down at the newsstand an hour ago and bought the latest issue of La Città. You don't seem to know the whole story yet. Come with me.«*

Gianna's father goes to the dining table, where the newspaper lies open. Obviously, she had just disturbed him during his morning newspaper reading. He flips a few pages back and forth until he finally finds this little article again:

**On our own behalf**

*La Città newspaper mourns the death of its long-time collaborator Guiseppe Manzoni. Guiseppe died suddenly and unexpectedly yesterday at his home of a heart attack. He leaves behind his wife and two adult children. With Guiseppe we lose one of our best and most experienced employees. Our sympathy goes to his family and all his friends.*

Gianna turns as pale as the wall. Even the violet on her eye seems to be losing color.

*»This is terrible! This is already the third death in connection with these damned papers. First the two priests under the bridge and now Salvatore's friend. Salvatore probably doesn't even know about it yet. I have to tell him right away!«*

*»You have to go into hiding and get out of town!« her father yells at her in despair.*

*»Do you really think so?«*

*»Listen kid! I have no idea what this is all about. But certainly not about some little bribery scandal! This damned priest has unwittingly stepped on the toes of someone who wears huge shoes. There's a lot more at stake than a few million lire that went to some Roman councilors!«*

*»What are we supposed to do?«, Gianna asks in despair.*

*»You have to get out of the city until some grass grows over the matter! If they've killed the journalist, then they must have used force to get the information about his source out of him beforehand. Now, at the latest, they know Salvatore's identity. They had obviously already learned your name from the priest. If they are not afraid of murdering a journalist, you are next!«*

*»What if Manzoni really died of natural causes?«*

*»You don't believe that yourself! You told me how deeply the newspaper's publishing management is involved in this. They must have had this obituary dictated to them just like the coverage of the suicide of the two priests.«*

*»But where are Salvatore and I supposed to go?«*

*»I have an acquaintance in the Vatican who owes me a favor. He works in the pilgrims' office and can issue you passes that will hopefully get you out of Rome without problems.«*

*»But what will happen to you and my friends in the shared flat? The man who attacked me has threatened to harm all of you too!«*

*»Your mother and I could perhaps go into hiding for a while with Aunt Gina in Naples. Mom has always gotten along well with her sister. Maybe Gina will take us in for a while. I will talk to Mom about everything when she comes home. I just hope she doesn't get too upset!«*

*»And Marco and Maria?«*

*»You'll have to talk to them yourself! But first go to Salvatore and tell him about the death of his friend. Tell him to take care of himself until I get you the permits! If he wants, he can stay with us. That goes for you too, of course! I'm afraid, though, that if they're looking for you, they'll quickly find you at our place, too.«*

*»Oh, Daddy!« says Gianna in a sad voice. »I'm so sorry that I got you into something like this!«*

Mr. Marconi takes his daughter in his arms and tries to put a convinced tone in his voice.

*»It's not your fault. Everything is going to be alright!«*

## **Retreat**

Georgios has already been on the road for a few months. Towards the south - towards Greece. Where there's a will, there's a way. He had thought. There is no shortage of ways. However, there is a lack of transportation. Every German municipality now arbitrarily decides who is allowed to travel with whom and when. Foreigners traveling alone are at the bottom of the waiting lists. At best, they benefit from the fact that people want to get rid of them. In many a city that Georgios passed through during his long odyssey, they were happy to get rid of an unnecessary eater like him as quickly as possible. And they put him in the next best truck that drove out of town. If he had recorded his route and measured the zigzagging truck kilometers, he would probably have made it once to Saloniki and back to Cologne.

If he gets stuck in a city for too long, he continues on foot. Sometimes someone takes pity on him and gives him a ride part of the way. Most of the time, however, he is shunned. As a Greek, he doesn't exactly fit the typical image of a refugee, but without doubt he is recognized as a southerner. The longer he is on the road, the more vagabond-like his appearance becomes.

Things get really bad when he reaches Frankfurt am Main. Starving as he is, he is drawn to the city center in the hope of finding a few compatriots

who will support him on his journey with some food and new shoes. What he experiences firsthand instead is one of the many pogroms against the foreign population that are currently the order of the day in many German cities.

When he reaches Munich, he is even briefly put into a concentration camp outside the city gates. To use this term is, of course, forbidden under penalty of law, and it is only used in this way by the foreigners interned there. But what else should one call this barracks fenced in with barbed wire at an abandoned airfield? Thousands of foreigners are held there within sight of the concentration camp memorial site near Dachau under absolutely inhumane conditions and shielded from the local population.

When the fences are torn down during a revolt by hundreds of angry black Africans, Georgios also seizes this unique chance to escape and continues on his way towards the Alps. Without money, food stamps and barter goods, the search for food alone is a daily struggle, which he loses on many a day. Often he has to set up his night camp with an empty stomach. Sometimes he meets helpful people, sometimes even a few slices of bread fall off for him at one of the food counters. Most of the time, however, he is chased away under threat of violence. And sometimes it does not remain only with the threat.

Over time, he becomes more and more adept at organizing food. Sometimes he takes advantage of an opportune moment to steal a few potatoes from a market stall. Sometimes he finds a few freshly laid eggs in an unlocked chicken coop. Necessity makes him inventive, and he had already learned a lot about invention during his studies at the University of Athens.

Before winter sets in, he has crossed the Alps and is trying to get a passage to Greece in the port of Venice. However, international shipping traffic is still completely suspended. The port is run by the starving city exclusively for fishing purposes. Georgios quickly realizes that the sea route remains blocked for him until further notice.

Of necessity, he takes the long overland route across the Balkans. The former border fences between the collapsed Balkan states are not much of an obstacle for him. There is no longer any state power that feels responsible for protecting these border fortifications. And his direction is pointing against the flow of migrants, which even in these chaotic times pours unabated from south to north.

When he reaches Croatia, hope slowly germinates in him that the worst is now behind him and that he will see his homeland and his family again in the foreseeable future.

## **Banquet**

David and his boss have had a long day at work. On the way back to the hotel, they are both happy to be able to take another short walk. Reverend Bonelli accompanied them this time only as far as the edge of the Vatican Gardens and then roughly explained the rest of the way. They can't get lost on the fenced-in grounds of the Vatican State anyway.

When they arrive at the hotel, they still have just under an hour before they are picked up for the promised "social event". Just enough time to shower and put on something fresh. Bonelli had recommended casual leisure wear. But when David meets Thomas Prenninger in the hotel lobby, his superior is dressed as if he were attending one of his usual business lunches. Dark suit, black leather shoes, tie and collar. David wonders what his boss didn't understand about the word leisure. But what does he know, as a little IT-guy, what his superior is up to in his spare time. If he has anything like that at all.

They don't have to wait long, as the black minibus that brought them here yesterday stops in front of the hotel entrance. David also immediately recognizes the two black-clad unsympathetic figures from the Swiss Guard who are just getting off the shuttle bus. This time, however, they are accompanied by Alberto Bonelli, Sergio Giocondo and Enzo Agnesi. All five enter the hotel lobby and greet David and Thomas.

*Reverend Bonelli says with a grin, »But Mr. Prenninger, why are you dressed so formally? Didn't I point out that casual clothes are sufficient tonight?«*

*»Yes, reverend, but I didn't want to seem rude. Besides, you still have your cassock on!«*

*»We priests are on a mission from God around the clock and have no free time. I didn't know that you were also subject to such constraints.«*

David can hardly stifle his laughter. Then the five get into the black minibus. As they leave the protective walls of the Vatican City State, it is already getting dark. They drive through the unlit streets of the city center. David quickly loses all orientation. After about fifteen minutes, the minibus stops in front of a nondescript house.

*»Gentlemen, please get out of the car. Here we are!« calls Reverend Bonelli.*

While the armed escorts remain in the car, the five passengers get out and follow the priest to a large front door. With the metal door knocker, Bonelli knocks three times on the door. It takes a little while, then the door is opened by a fat man in some kind of knight's armor. He reminds David of the comic books with the Gauls and the Romans. Surprisingly, he immediately greets the group in German, albeit with a strong Italian accent:

*»Welcome my very honored guests to the Tavern of Lucullus! In case you do not know me yet: My name is Centurion Marcus Flavius. Come in and join us for an unforgettable evening of food and drink!«*

This living joke is obviously the landlord of this establishment. While he speaks, he gestures wildly with his arms, probably to lend as much pathos as possible to his unctuous words. He leads his guests through a few winding corridors into a large hall, which, however, seems quite sparsely furnished: In the center is a large round table made of white marble.

Around it are five strange pieces of furniture, which David believes to be some kind of recliner. The entire floor is covered with rough tiles. In some places, colorful stone mosaics are embedded in the floor. Burning torches and candles hang on the walls. They spread warmth and a slightly sooty smell.

*»Gentlemen, please put on your toga now. Our slave Lydia will assist you!«*

The mentioned slave Lydia seems to be one of the waitresses. Smiling amiably, she hands each of the guests a kind of white cloak from which only the head and arms peek out and which reaches almost to the feet. All five men look quite silly after putting this ghost costume over their heads. But by far most stupid looks Thomas Prenninger, who now lets his tie hang out of this full-body bib.

*»Dear Sirs! In ancient Rome it was customary to take meals lying down. Now please move to your dining sofas and let us pamper you with exquisite culinary delights. Our chef has prepared the following dishes for you today:«*

- *Fresh pita bread with olive spread*
- *Grilled chicken served with corn on the cob fried in butter and polenta*
- *Marinated fish from the Mediterranean*
- *Roasted eggplant, stuffed zucchini, grilled peppers and other fresh vegetables.*
- *Fruit and mixed salad*
- *Cheese from Gaul*

*»To accompany it, we serve exquisite honey wine and clear mountain spring water from the upper reaches of the Tiber River.«*

The five men have hardly sat down at the table when three waiters - also dressed as Roman slaves - begin to fill the round marble table with plates and bowls. The priest does not miss the opportunity to say grace. Then the gluttony begins. It becomes a long and opulent meal. David has also brought a huge appetite. After all, since breakfast in the hotel, he had only had a sandwich from the cafeteria of the Vatican Bank. He could have gladly done without this put-on ancient Roman fuss. The good and many food compensates him however for everything. The three waitress slaves have plenty to do with bringing in food and keeping the drinking cups filled. David notices that all three waiters wear name tags. He wonders if this was really the custom in ancient Rome. But what arouses his interest even more is the name on one of the tags:

*S. M. Al-Sayed*

This was also the surname of his family before fleeing Syria, and before his father later took the name Jonas. And in general, David has the feeling that he has seen this young man before. The first "S" is on all the name tags and probably means Servus or slave. The "M" then probably stands for the waiter's first name. David takes it upon himself to talk to this guy once after the meal.

Meanwhile, an old man with a guitar has taken a seat in a corner of the hall and begins to pluck away on his instrument. From song to song, however, he gets louder and louder, and when he starts to sing at the top of his voice, Sergio Giocondo asks him to tone it down a bit, otherwise they won't be able to talk at the table. Then Sergio - already quite drunk - begins to rave about his earlier visits to this locality and how much he appreciates the old Roman way of life:

*»The ancient Romans still knew how to celebrate. The feasts in ancient times were very enjoyable in every respect! Unfortunately, with the official invitations of the Vatican here always only the music program is booked. But I was already here with some pilgrim groups who had booked the full program! I can tell you: There it goes high! In ancient Rome, the profession of*



*the prostitute was something quite honorable! The pleasures of the palate and the flesh have always been close to each other. You can not imagine what sometimes here in the back rooms ... «*

*»Sergio, that's enough!« Reverend Bonelli interrupts him. »I think you've had too much to drink!«*

The scolded project manager is instantly silent. Enzo Agnesi, with whom David had actually gotten along well all day, had hardly said a word all evening. The whole time he had been listlessly poking at his food. Something seems to be bothering him badly. Thomas Prenninger, on the other hand, seems to have been waiting for his cue:

*»Sergio, next time you come to Vienna for a return visit, I will order a table for both of us at the Mutzenbacher<sup>12</sup>. There is also a very exquisite cuisine and when the greatest hunger is satisfied, you can retire with the waiters in the séparées or in the broom closet! I'm sure you'll love it!«*

Then he lowers the volume of his voice and asks unabashedly into the round:

*»Is there any possibility of an upgrade to the local event here? I mean I would pay for that privately too if you know what I mean?«*

But Alberto Bonelli only looks at him pityingly and answers with priestly firmness:

*»My dear Mr. Prenninger, if you have enough Roman lire in your pocket, you can do whatever you want in this city. If, however, you only have plastic money or banknotes from your Danube domain with you, you will probably have to make do with what the Vatican considers right and proper. And your extra wishes unfortunately do not belong to it.«*

Then he returns to table conversation as if nothing had happened:

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12 Josefina Mutzenbacher: Viennese prostitute (1852-1904)

*»Gentlemen, I think we should now move on to the finale of this exquisite meal. As you surely know, cheese closes the stomach. Centurion! Bring on the cheese platter!«*

The meal goes into its last round and although all guests are actually already more than full, hardly anything remains on the cheese platter. Slowly, David begins to appreciate the advantages of this comfortable reclining furniture. After all, they make it possible to take a resting posture that promotes digestion after the meal. Before the convivial round can take the opportunity for a digestive nap, however, the restless centurion arrives again with a box of original Old Roman cigars. David waves thanks and leaves his couch during the smoking break to follow a small signpost in the direction of the locus. After relieving himself there of a liter of honey wine, he meets the waiter in the hallway on his way back, whose name tag he had noticed earlier. A little uncertainly he asks him:

*»Do you speak english? Do you speak German?«*

The waiter, however, only looks at him questioningly and mumbles something in Italian, which David does not understand. After thinking about it for a moment, David tries Arabic:

*»My name is Daoud Al-Sayed. Can you understand me?«*

David has not spoken a word of Arabic for years. When his grandparents were still alive, he had learned it from them. His parents had spoken German with him from the beginning. After the death of his grandparents, his Arabic language skills had atrophied again, so that he understands most of it, but has problems speaking it. The waiter seems to feel the same way. With a beaming face, he answers in a similarly bumpy Syrian-Arabic:

*»Yes, I understand you! Do we know each other?«*

*»I don't think so. My father's name is Said Al-Sayed and my grandfather's name is Daoud Al-Sayed, like me. My family is originally from Aleppo in Syria and emigrated from there about forty years ago.«*

The waiter's eyes narrow. David is not sure whether he has expressed himself clearly. But the waiter replies thoughtfully:

*»My ancestors are also from Aleppo. Which neighborhood did your grandparents live in?«*

*»My grandfather always told me that they lived in Jabal Badro in the east of Aleppo. But where exactly, I don't know.«*

*»That's interesting! That's where my ancestors come from too.«*

The two young men look at each other, perplexed. Can it be that this is a series of coincidences or is there more to it. The waiter now begins to tell his family story in detail:

*»As far as I know, my family fled Aleppo in 2015. At that time there was a civil war and the city was completely destroyed. My grandparents fled to Turkey with their two sons. There they found an escape agent who brought them to southern Italy by ship for a lot of money. There they were interned in a camp for several weeks. My grandfather desperately wanted to continue to Germany, but this seemed quite hopeless. Finally, after many futile attempts, he found an escape agent who wanted to take him and the entire family to northern Italy in a truck. However, things went wrong during the nighttime departure. Instead of the promised truck, only two vans arrived and there was only room for three or one person in them. The escape agent promised that both vehicles would go together and told my grandfather that his family would have to split up between the two vans. He refused at first, of course, and tried to persuade other refugees to change cars. But they did not understand his language. Finally, he was faced with the alternative of remaining in the camp with his family for an indefinite period of time or following the request of the escape agent and putting a family member into the second van. In view of the inhumane conditions in this reception camp, he then asked his oldest son - my father - to get into the second truck. Shortly thereafter, the journey began. The van with my father in it, got into a checkpoint and all the occupants were sent to a camp near Naples. My father never saw his family again!«*

With every word David hears, his eyes get bigger and bigger. He knows this story. He has been told it countless times. It had always annoyed him when his parents and grandparents started telling their old war stories again. Grandmother had cried, grandfather had scolded, and his parents had always started to argue. But the fact that David hears the same old story from the mouth of a young waiter here in faraway Rome, of all places, makes his blood run cold.

*»I know this story,« he begins hesitantly. »My father and my grandparents told it to me many times! My father must be your father's brother. Is your father also named Dauod, like our grandfather and me?«*

Now even the waiter opens his eyes in disbelief. Can this be true or is this foreign tourist putting on a very nasty show with him?

*»Yes, exactly! My father's name is also Daoud. And my name is Mohammad, by the way. So you mean we are related?«*

*»Looks like it. I was always told this very story. The van with my grandparents and my father went all the way to Verona. When the other van with your father didn't arrive, my grandparents went sheer mad. They stayed in Verona for weeks and tried everything possible to find out where their oldest son was. But he stayed lost. Finally, they continued on their way towards Germany, hoping to meet him again there. My grandparents tried all their lives to find their lost son, but without success. Does your father also live here in Rome?«*

*»Yes, he does. He was housed in this internment camp near Naples for several months. At some point he managed to escape. He got as far as Rome and then went into hiding there for a while. It was here that he met my mother and ended up staying. At that time, Rome was still a great city. Until the big economic crisis came and everything here went down the drain. My parents must have had a difficult time back then. In the meantime, however, they are doing well and my father leads a modest existence as a cobbler in the old town.«*

David can hardly believe it. He has an uncle, an aunt and a cousin here in Rome. And his uncle is a cobbler. Just like David's father and grandfather. When his father finds out! Anyway, when he gets back home, he'll have to break it to his father gently.

*»Mohammad, I'm flying back to Vienna tomorrow. Can I meet you and your family tomorrow morning?«*

At that moment, the host comes and gives his waiter an angry look. Mohammad whispers to David:

*»I have to go back to work. My boss doesn't like employees talking to guests. I'll write down my address for you.«*

He then quickly disappears into the kitchen. David goes back into the dining room and takes a seat on his couch again. By now the air is full of acrid cigar smoke and David gets nostalgic for the Viennese restaurants where smoking is strictly banned. His boss, of course, can't resist commenting:

*»Well, David, that was a long session! Or did you find a way to the back rooms after all?«*

Since the others are having a lively conversation anyway, David simply ignores the question. He doesn't have to account to his boss for every step he takes. Besides, Thomas Prenninger is obviously already far too drunk to expect a serious answer.

The evening drags on for over an hour until Reverend Bonelli thinks it is time to pick up the table. He gets up from his couch, goes to the centurion and discreetly slips him a bundle of banknotes, which the centurion, without recounting, lets disappear into his armor. The other guests also slowly rise from their couches, free themselves from their togas and hand them over to the waiting servants. David hands over his toga to Mohammad. Mohammad inconspicuously hands him a small piece of paper, which David lets disappear in his pocket in an unobserved moment. The host thanks him and leads his guests out of the restaurant onto the street, where the black minibus is already waiting for the group. After

about fifteen minutes of driving through the pitch-dark streets, they reach the Vatican and the hotel.

## Thunderstorm

Immediately after Reverend Alberto Bonelli has dropped off the guests from Vienna at the Hotel Villa Medici, he switches on his smartphone and checks the messages he has received in the meantime. Five missed calls from his monsignor! After all, he had specifically logged off with him and also said that he would turn off his cell phone. In the Roman tavern he would have had no reception from the Vatican mobile network anyway. Bonelli listens to the last voice message on his voicemail. When Monsignor Scarelli shouts his message into his ear, he reflexively holds his phone a little away from his head:

*»BONELLI, WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? COME TO MY PRIVATE ROOM IMMEDIATELY AFTER THIS BUSINESS DINNER, AND WHEN I SAY IMMEDIATELY, I MEAN IMMEDIATELY!«*

Alberto Bonelli takes a deep breath. He had originally imagined life as a private secretary differently. What louse has gotten into his monsignor's liver again that he still wants to see him in the middle of the night? Why can't the matter wait until tomorrow morning? Scowling he goes straight to the Monsignor's living quarters. To his great surprise, he does not find him alone. When Alberto Bonelli enters the living room, he sees a strange man with whom Monsignor Scarelli seems to be having an animated conversation.

*»Bonelli, there you are at last! That took an eternity! How can one only waste so much time with food and then still in such a miserable ordinarily food booth! Let me introduce you: Boris Luganov from the Neva domain. Alberto Bonelli, my private secretary and confidant.«*

*»Good evening!« Bonelli answers and shakes hands with the stranger.*

*»Signore Luganov will assist us in a delicate matter. While you were allowed to fill your belly, here in the Vatican the events have overturned! Your so-called guests from Vienna are obviously here for a completely different reason than they want to make us believe. While you were sitting with this Mr. Prenninger today, his colleague Jonas tried to hack into our database!«*

*»Monsignor, I can't believe it. I've gotten to know both of them quite well by now, and they really don't look like spies to me. If I may say so, this Prenninger is a cock-controlled busybody and this Jonas is just a very insignificant IT-guy.«*

Alberto Bonello had better not have said that. Monsignor Scarelli suddenly gets a red head and yells at him:

*»Insignificant IT guy? How do you know that? I'll tell you what this insignificant IT guy did when he was unattended for a minute! He hacked into the database and did a very specific search for our black money transfers. When he found what he was looking for, he quickly covered all traces and made it look as if nothing had happened! Insignificant IT bastard! You idiot! Do you still believe that they came to us to prepare some software project? I tell you, they are two very savvy spies!«*

*»Do you really think so, Monsignor?« asks Alberto Bonelli, visibly intimidated.*

*But he shouts even louder: »Of course! As soon as they are back in Vienna, they will pass on their findings to their clients and then our work of the last few years will have been in vain! Do you finally understand?«*

Alberto Bonelli is still not quite convinced that this likeable young man is a spy. On the other hand, he remembers that he once disappeared for a conspicuously long time after dinner. Bonelli suspected that perhaps the meal had not been to his liking. Perhaps he had been looking for an amorous adventure after the previous table conversation. The other guest had made no secret of his sexual needs. Perhaps all Viennese were like that? But what if he had contacted an accomplice during this time? But

how could he have done that? He didn't know where the dinner would take place. Although - the Vatican Bank had already taken some guests to this restaurant in the past years. With a professional intelligence preparation, it would have been theoretically possible to foresee this daily routine and to plan a conspiratorial meeting at the restaurant. On the other hand, the guards of the Swiss Guard had been waiting in front of the restaurant all the time. If they had noticed anything suspicious, they would certainly have reported it to him. No matter how Bonelli turns it around: He remains torn between suspicion and a presumption of innocence. Finally, he decides not to tell the monsignor about Mr. Jonas' absence in the restaurant, so as not to expose himself even more to the wrath of his superior.

*»Monsignor, what do you suggest we do to deal with the situation?« he asks cautiously.*

*Scarelli answers unusually quietly: »These spies must not return to Vienna with their knowledge. Mr. Luganov will take appropriate measures. I have already discussed all the details with him.«*

Alberto Bonelli turns as pale as the wall.

*»You mean you want them - «*

*»Don't make such a fuss, Bonelli. You are no longer an innocent lamb. Do I have to mention this tiresome affair with the bribes here in Rome? Who then assigned Bruno to eliminate the two traitors from our ranks?«*

*"Monsignor, Bruno should teach them a lesson! I never spoke of murder!« Bonelli stammers stunned.*

*»Then he must have misunderstood you. But by the way, this matter is by no means over yet either. That little bitch lied to us! When Bruno visited her at home, she allegedly promised him on high that only she knew about these documents and that she had sent them anonymously to the newspaper.«*



*»So what?« Bonelli asks cautiously.*

*Scarelli is now screaming again with a red head: »She lied to us, that bloody bitch! Meanwhile we know that these documents were delivered by a certain Salvatore Pollini personally to a reporter of the newspaper. This Pollini knows at least as much about these transfer documents as this Gianna Marconi. I'm beginning to get the feeling that I'm surrounded only by bunglers and complete idiots. Everything seems to be going wrong here at the moment, just because some people seem to be incapable of doing their job properly! And that just now in this critical phase, when we really don't need any disturbing fire from any side wars! Did you think that Mr. Luganov, whom I hold in high esteem, came to Rome to deal with such trifles here?«*

Alberto Bonelli shakes his head in intimidation. He knows his superior's cross-domain connections to some powerful people Bonelli would rather never have met in life. While he is not privy to the exact details of this ongoing conspiracy, he knows that the people involved are all completely unscrupulous and will walk over dead bodies without batting an eye.

*»Your Eminence, are you saying that Mr. Luganov is supposed to kill the two journalists?«*

*»You moron! Have you still not understood that Mr. Luganov is no ordinary petty criminal? It's bad enough that we need his professional support in the matter with the two spies from Vienna. The two journalists should be silenced by Bruno! And you Bonelli, will hire him! And this time, express yourself clearly! Do you understand that?«*

## **Open University**

One evening, Jan Eckert's fellow student Patrick comes storming into the living room of the shared flat all excited.

*»Jan, have you heard? The universities want to resume their teaching!«*

*»Really? How do you know that?«*

*»I went by my university today. There were information posters on display saying that all students of economics should come to an information event in the large auditorium of the University of Cologne next Friday.«*

*»And what is that supposed to be about?« asks Jan, somewhat irritated.*

*»Wouldn't you like to know?« says Patrick with a wink. »Well, you'll find out there at the latest! I'm definitely going! Aren't you?«*

*»Yes, of course I'll come,« Jan answers after a moment's thought.*

For more than a year, there had been no lectures at any university in the greater Cologne area. Many students had left their place of study and returned to their home towns, to their parents. The teaching staff had been released and had to devote themselves less to academic topics and more to practical matters.

*»But I know even more!« Patrick begins again. »Are you interested?«*

*»Now say it!«*

*»I talked to one of my former instructors today who now works in the food stamp administration. He's already in the know, and he told me what they're going to announce there next Friday.«*

*»Now don't keep me in suspense!«*

*»The point is that in the long term, the labor market will again need well-educated people with a university education. At the moment, there is nothing more to come and if nothing changes, there will eventually be no one left who can get the economy going again. So they want to enable young people like us to get a university degree again, so that we can then pull the cart out of the mud with our knowledge!«*

*»I'm laughing my head off!« Jan says rather humorlessly. »We're just going to keep doing the same thing at the university as we did before the crisis? How do you expect to finance that?«*

*»It will definitely not be the same as before! The only thing the universities can do at the moment is to establish a simplified examination system. We are then supposed to educate ourselves and prepare for the exams in our free time using already existing videos, scripts, books and so on. We will also not be students in the previous sense, but we will continue to be used in our labor service.«*

*»How are we supposed to get it together? Work and study at the same time?« Jan asks skeptically.*

*»It certainly won't be easy, but I used to work while I was studying. If you want to, it's definitely possible! I'm also sure that they will lower the level of the exams a bit. There's no point in going to all this trouble and then having students rush through the exam en masse.«*

*»So you mean that in the future, the university will just be a kind of certifying institute that can give you an academic title after you pass the exam?«*

*»You could say so," Patrick says, nodding his head in agreement. »For now, there's no more research or teaching there, just exams. Although you can't say that about teaching either. There is already a video recording of almost every lecture. It doesn't really matter whether you watch it on the computer or sit in on the real lecture. Maybe that's even more effective!«*

Jan is still not entirely convinced whether all this is really a good idea. But at least his life is moving forward again. In any case, he will join the upcoming information event.

## **Stazione Termini**

David had lain awake for a long time that night. Again and again, the events of the last few weeks ran before his mind's eye as if in an endless

loop: The last conversations with his colleague Klaus Baumann, his terrible end in the sewers and the subsequent amateurish investigative work of the Vienna police. Then, yesterday, the suspicious transfers from the Vatican Bank, which point to a connection with Klaus' death. Finally the meeting with Mohammad. David feels as if he has suddenly rediscovered a few pieces of his family's life puzzle that he thought were lost. Now he has the chance to put all the pieces back together and finally reunite his torn family.

David would like to use the morning to visit his cousin. Mohammad had given him his address yesterday. Maybe he could even meet his uncle on this occasion! His boss had told him that the private jet would fly back in the early afternoon. Let's hope that their hosts don't think of anything important. Normally, the way these meetings work is that there is a short wrap-up on the last day. Everyone pats each other on the back and unanimously emphasizes how important and successful the meeting was. Then shake hands and goodbye! But it can also turn out quite differently: Someone asks a stupid question and the meeting ends up with an endless discussion about a trivial detail.

As far as his new findings about the incriminating money transfers are concerned, David is still completely undecided about how to deal with them. Actually, he would be obliged to inform his boss immediately. But then he would also have to justify his previous secretiveness. Including his false - or at least incomplete - statement to the Vienna police. David prefers to suppress this topic for the time being. Maybe he'll think of something clever to say about it when he gets home.

When David is awakened by the singing birds, he has slept just three hours. Correspondingly tired, he meets an astonishingly good-humored Thomas Prenninger at breakfast.

*»A beautiful good morning to you! Did you sleep as well as I did?«*

*»Thank you, go like this!«*

*»The good food didn't agree with you! You look tired!«*

*»I guess I was still thinking too much about the new database connection and that's why I couldn't fall asleep,« David lies.*

*»You young programmers just can't set the right priorities yet. Duty is duty and booze is booze.«*

Thomas Prenninger beckons one of the waiters to fill up his champagne glass and wash down his thickly topped smoked salmon roll with it.

An hour later, they are sitting in the lobby waiting for Reverend Bonelli, who rolls in almost on time for the revolving door. He looks as if he had partied all night: Pale as the wall and dark circles under his eyes. Thomas Prenninger can't resist asking him about his appearance:

*»Good morning, Reverend! You look to me like you tasted a little too much of that excellent honey wine yesterday! I hope you had a reasonably good night anyway.«*

Alberto Bonelli, however, seems quite short-tempered and replies:

*»Thank you, for asking. We priests are indeed not used to celebrating as your kind are. I only came to wish you a safe flight home. My Monsignor would also have liked to meet you in person and thank you for the constructive meeting. Unfortunately, his schedule does not allow him to be here today, so you will have to make do with just me again. In any case, I would like to thank you, also on behalf of all my colleagues from the Bank, for the good cooperation. Farewell and may God's blessings be with you all the time!«*

He then shakes hands with both of them and says goodbye as quickly as he came. When he has left the hotel, Thomas Prenninger says to David:

*»Did you notice how sweaty his hands were? He really seems to have had too much alcohol yesterday!«*

*»Indeed. When is our plane back to Vienna?«*

*»At three o'clock in the afternoon. The shuttle will pick us up here at the reception at half past one. I'll hit the gym and the hotel sauna by then and relax a bit. What are your plans?«*

*»I'm going to look around the city a bit,« David says. »Maybe I'll come straight from there to the airport. So if I'm not here at half past two, please drive to the airport alone. I'll meet you there. I'll leave my suitcase at the reception. Can you please take it with you to the airport?«*

*»I can do that. But take care! Rome is not supposed to be safe for tourists!«*

*»All right! See you later then!«*

With that, they part ways. David goes to the young lady at the reception desk to inquire about a cab:

*»Hello, can you call me a taxi to the city of Rome please?«*

*»Sorry Sir, we recommend not to leave Vatican state on your own. The city is very dangerous for tourists!«*

*»Thank you for this information. But I need a driver who takes me to a certain place and back again.«*

The receptionist tries a few more times to dissuade David from his unusual plan, but then finally calls a Roman cab company that seems to have a cooperation agreement with the hotel. After a long conversation, she hangs up again and turns to David:

*»The cab is here in about 15 minutes. You act on your own risk and you have to pay the driver in cash! Do you have roman money?«*

David confirms again to the young lady that he will take good care of himself. Then he goes to another counter at the lobby to get a few Roman lire for the cab ride. The charge is made completely unproblematically via his credit card. The cashier has obviously noticed that David wants to take

a cab ride and is a little surprised at the amount of money he intends to take with him.

*»Taxi in Rome is very cheap, sir!«*

But David insists on the amount. After all, he doesn't want to be stranded somewhere in Rome with too little money. Besides, Mohammad and his family can certainly make good use of the rest.

Ten minutes later, he is sitting in the lobby with a bulging wallet and a small folding map of the city center, waiting for his cab. He has also left his suitcase at the reception desk so that his boss can take him to the airport if necessary. He doesn't have to wait long, as an ancient Fiat stops in the driveway of the hotel and an older gentleman with a cigarette in his mouth and a slider cap on his head gets out. With a somewhat uncertain look, he peers in at the glass front and finally enters the hotel. When the receptionist catches sight of him, she silently sends him straight to David with a nod of her head.

*»Signore, Taxi to Rome?« he asks, addressing David.*

*»Si, grazie.«*

David follows the driver to his cab. The man holds the rear door open for him and asks him to get in. When the driver has taken a seat at the wheel, he turns back in David's direction and asks:

*»Where going, signore?«*

David hands him the note that Mohammad had slipped him yesterday:

*»36 Via d'Azeglio, Piano 3, Mohammad«*

The cab driver thinks for a moment and then shakes his head in disbelief.

*»Aaah, Stazione Termini!«*

Then the old clunker slowly starts to move. When they have left the Vatican behind them, David gets a sinking feeling in his stomach. What has he gotten himself into again? After a few minutes, he calms down

again and begins to enjoy the ride. Driving through an open-air museum in a vintage car is something David has never experienced before. All the side windows on the cab are rolled down - David wonders if it has any windows at all - so that the driver's cigarette smoke doesn't bother him any more and the warm breeze blows through his hair. The car radio plays Italian evergreens and the driver sings along loudly. The whole atmosphere is completely different from the horror ride from the airport to the Vatican. At some places, the driver tries to explain a few places. But David does not understand much of what is said. Only "Ponte Regina" when they cross a bridge over the Tiber and "Villa Borghese" when they drive through a forest. David already fears that they have left the city, but after a while the dense greenery ends and the city has them again. This must be a very important villa, if one can conclude here from the size of the garden to the house. Probably a summer residence of the Pope, David thinks and decides to look into it at home.

*»Piazza Esedra. We soon there!« the cab driver shouts as they round a large square with a dry fountain in the middle.*

And indeed: barely a minute later, a huge and wide square suddenly appears in front of them. It spontaneously reminds David of the various train station forecourts he has already seen on his previous business trips. But here everything is different. The buildings around the square look old and dilapidated, hardly a soul can be seen in the entire area. Between the paving slabs and through the closed asphalt surface, weeds and even smaller trees are sprouting.

*»Stazione Termini. Here destination!« the cab driver calls to David in the back.*

*»No Signore, Via d'Azeglio!« David replies indignantly.*

*»No no Signore. Not further than here! Very dangerous here!«*



The cab driver seems determined not to take his passenger any further than this ghost place. When David shows him his map from the hotel, he points to a few spots and tries to explain the rest of the walk.

*»Via d'Azeglio not far from here. Via Cavour - Via Giovanni Amendola - Via d'Azeglio. Only five minutes walk. But be careful! Very dangerous!«*

Apparently, nothing can persuade the driver to drive these last few meters any further. When David asks him if he can wait for him here, he shakes his head in horror. Finally, they both agree that the driver will pick him up again right here in three hours and drive him to the airport. Before he lets David off, however, he insists on payment for the ride so far. On a small writing pad, he writes a round four-digit number. David rummages in his wallet, adds a thousand lire bill as a tip and hands the bundle to the cab driver. The driver looks at him stunned and stammers:

*»Grazie mille, signore! Grazie mille!«*

As soon as David gets out of the back seat, the driver hits the gas and speeds away as fast as he can. Now David is again overcome by the sinking feeling he had felt at the beginning of the trip. Following the cab driver's directions, David leaves the large square and follows the course of a wide street. Via Cavour is written on a large marble slab on one of the massive house facades. These must once have been really magnificent houses, almost like the ones David knows from the surroundings of the Vienna Hofburg. But completely neglected! The window panes are mostly missing, the roofs are damaged and overgrown, the facade stones are partly broken out and the first floor walls have been sprayed with graffiti art almost all over. But at least he seems to be on the right track. When David wants to turn right into the next side street, he quickly sees that there is no way through. A huge pile of garbage and debris blocks his way and forces him to look for another way. Things don't look much better in the next cross street. Here, the remains of a burned-out and collapsed hotel ruin lie in the way and prevent any passage. Somehow he has to get to the next

cross street. David sees an open driveway to a backyard. Maybe this is the way to his destination. If he could at least ask someone. But either the residents here are all taking a siesta or the area is really as deserted as it seems. On the station square he had seen at least a few isolated people running around. It is definitely too early for a siesta. When David left the hotel, it was just nine o'clock and that is now just half an hour ago. David has meanwhile crossed the covered dark driveway and reached the inner courtyard of the spacious building complex. He slowly lets his eyes wander in all directions. No one lives here! No flowers in the windows, most of the window panes broken and garbage lying around everywhere. There is definitely no way through here. David decides to go back to the main street and try one of the following cross streets.

When he wants to go back through the courtyard entrance, he suddenly realizes that he has made a crucial mistake. The way back to the street is blocked by a couple of figures. He can't make out their faces because of the darkness in the driveway. But their silhouettes stand out well against the bright light of the cross street and what David sees is enough to make his heart beat up to his neck. Hesitantly, he approaches the three rather lanky men. However, they do not give the impression that they would let him pass through this driveway unscathed. Two of them hold in their hands a baseball bat or a comparable large striking instrument. As he stands directly in front of them, the largest of them shouts something unintelligible in Italian at him and pushes him to the ground with force. Slightly dazed, David slowly gets back up and desperately tries to sort out his options. His instinct, however, is to flee! As fast as he can, David runs back to the courtyard he just came from. Maybe he can escape the guys after all. When he reaches a wall with an adjacent garage, he desperately tries to climb up the gutter. Maybe he can get over the wall to the other side and from there back onto the street. As is well known, hope dies last. Shortly before he reaches the top of the wall, his pursuers catch up with him and violently pull him to the ground.

»After hope, man dies« is the last thought that runs through David's head as the brute blow of a wooden club hurtling down on him knocks out his life lights.

## **Ambush**

In the late afternoon, Gianna sits alone and lonely at the kitchen table of her shared apartment, reading the current issue of La Città. Marco and Maria are gone. There had been some unpleasant scenes in the last two days. Accusations, recriminations, justifications and apologies. In the end, all three agreed that it would probably be better if they preferred to avoid their shared apartment in Trastevere in the near future. Maria had moved in with a teacher friend near her school. Marco had gone into hiding with some old buddies. Gianna had held down the fort the longest. But she too had left the apartment at every opportunity to stay with friends, Salvatore, or her parents.

Once again, there is not a single word in the newspaper about the bribery scandal in the city council. Nor is there any report about the death of Guiseppe Manzoni. Instead, Gianna finds the usual news from Rome and around the world under "Urbi et Orbi:

*Pope travels to Mississippi domain to canonize Martin Luther King!*

*Elon Musk returned from the moon!*

*Bones of Beppe Grillo discovered in Roman catacombs!*

*Was Silvio Berlusconi really gay?*

Gianna swears that today is the last time she'll spend money on this rag. Who cares about this bullshit? How much she misses her computer and access to the wealth of information on the Internet. These newspaper rascals only print what the publishing management and the sponsors behind them dictate into their pens.

Suddenly the doorbell rings. Gianna tiptoes to the apartment door and peers cautiously through the peephole. Instinctively, she holds her hands in front of her head as if to protect herself from something. She noticed this strange habit in herself a few days ago and can't quite explain it. However, her pulse slows down again when she sees her father standing in front of the door.

*»Daddy! Come in!«*

Gianna gives him a fleeting kiss on the cheek, moves into him the apartment and quickly closes the door behind him.

*»Greetings child! I have just come from the Vatican and have brought the passes for you and Salvatore.«*

They both go to the kitchen, unfold the two documents on the table and look at them silently for a while.

*»There are still the photos missing!« Gianna finally says.*

*»Yes, you still have to put them on. I have another sample copy here of how the whole thing should then look finished. The photo must be attached to the pass with two eyelets. Then you have to reproduce the stamp of the Vatican on the pass and the photo. Do you think you can do it?«*

*»I think so! Marco knows someone who can do that.«*

*»Is Marco still here in the apartment?«*

*»No, my flatmates are gone. Marco has temporarily disappeared with a few friends in the station area. He doesn't like to talk about it, but he lived there himself during his apprenticeship as a mechanic and apparently knows some shady characters there.«*

*»There are supposed to be enough of them there. There's nothing but riffraff in this area!« Gianna's father scolds her indignantly.*

*»Now don't do him an injustice! Marco couldn't stand living with his parents after school. His stepfather beat him up every day. What was he supposed to do? Anyway, back then he and his*

*buddies roamed the streets every day and found shelter at the old train station. The old dilapidated hotels have always attracted young homeless people. That's where he got stuck. You know that in the end he is basically a nice guy!«*

*»I have nothing against him personally, but every person is now also defined by the company he keeps.«*

*»Oh, Dad, don't be so stuffy! Marco has offered Salvatore and me that we can also go down for a few days with him and his old buddies. And that's exactly what we're going to do now!«*

*»My dear child, you will see how long you can stand it there in those slums. Without electricity and running water. In any case, you should leave the city as soon as possible! Get out of Rome and as far away from the Vatican as possible. The further you can get, the better!«*

*»What are you going to do now?«*

*»Mommy is already on her way to Aunt Gina. She has announced our coming to her in a letter. Hopefully the letter will arrive before she does! I still have a translation job to finish. I think I will be done with it tomorrow. I will then hand it in at the Vatican and travel to Naples to follow Mommy.«*

*»Aren't you afraid to go straight into the lion's den?«*

*»No! I've already tried to explain to you that you can't lump all people together in the Vatican. The people you seem to have gotten in the way of there have nothing to do with the people I work for.«*

*»How are we supposed to stay in touch?« Gianna asks with tears in her eyes.*

*»Just write us a letter from time to time about how you're doing. But in any case, avoid mentioning locations! No one - not even us - must know where you are! I think that Mommy and I will return to Rome after a few months. We can't hide for the rest of our lives*

*either. Maybe you can try to call us then. It would be nice if we could hear your voice from time to time!«*

Gianna knows the unreliability of the Roman telephone network. Calls from other domains are still almost impossible and work at best by hand exchange via the main post office.

*»I'll try!« she promises her father. »And please take very good care of yourselves! I only have the two of you!«*

Now Gianna can no longer stop herself from crying. Sobbing, she embraces her father and holds him tightly for a minute. And even the old Signore Marconi cannot suppress a few tears when he realizes that he will not see his beloved little daughter again for quite a while.

Then they give each other some more good advice here and promises there. But eventually all that can be said is said and the old man leaves his only daughter alone with her pain in the apartment.

Gianna remains sitting at the kitchen table for a few more minutes, lost in thought. Then she jumps up and banishes all melancholy thoughts from her mind. She gets her backpack, packs the passport and a few clothes into it and leaves the apartment as well. In the backyard she unchains her Vespa and makes her way to Salvatore's house. When she reaches the old building, she parks the scooter on the sidewalk and sprints up the stairs to Salvatore's apartment. Barely three seconds after she rings the doorbell, he opens the door.

*»Do you have the passes?« he asks Gianna, as soon as she is in the apartment.*

*»Yes, I'll show you, here look!«*

*»Gloria Montebello, secretary by profession and Cesare Botazzi, gardener by profession. Great! Couldn't I at least have been made a journalist? By the way, the photos are still missing!«*

*»Yes, but I know what that needs to look like and Marco will take care of it. Have you got your things packed?«*

*»Yes, there!« Salvatore points to a small backpack.*

*»Take as much money as you can! I also raided my piggy bank and stashed it all in the lid compartment of my backpack.«*

*»I've already done that. Everything is also in the backpack. Do you want me to take my ID with me?«*

*»No way! From now on we are Cesare and Gloria. Get used to it!«*

*»And these passes from the Vatican are recognized everywhere?«*

*»Yes, they issue something like this to pilgrims if their papers are stolen during their stay in Rome. It is said to happen more often. These passes are recognized as official travel documents at all domain borders in Europe.«*

*»Well, we'll see. After all, I've been to the southern domains many times with the market truck, and I can tell you that even with normal paperwork, the border guards look pretty closely and also hold out their hands before letting you go on.«*

*»Now don't get your knickers in a twist! We should get going now. Did you bring everything you need?« Gianna asks, visibly annoyed.*

*»Yes, I think so.«*

The two leave the apartment and Salvatore locks the door. As they descend the stairs, they hear the front door squeak at the bottom. Gianna goes to the banister and looks down through the wide stairwell to the first floor. At the same moment, a man looks up at her. Their eyes meet. Gianna freezes. She will never forget this face in her life!

*»Shit! That's the guy who beat me up in my apartment!« she whispers to Salvatore.*

*»Let's go. Come on!«*

Salvatore pulls Gianna up the stairs with him. Past his apartment one floor higher and then another. Until they are standing in front of the door to the attic. In the stairwell they already hear quick footsteps. The man has obviously recognized Gianna as well and is on their heels.

Salvatore pulls Gianna into the attic and tries to close the door.

*»Crap, there's no key here! Help me put this sofa in front of the door!«*

With their combined strength, they hoist an old sofa, covered with a sheet, in front of the door. Salvatore had always been upset about the fact that some residents deposit their garbage up here. Now he abruptly changes his mind about it. The attic door is blocked for the time being.

*»Quickly on! We have to see if we can get out of here!« Salvatore shouts out of breath.*

Together, they make their way crouched between the many clotheslines on which the residents have hung their laundry to dry. He looks up at the tilting skylights that let in light from above every few meters.

*»That one should work!« he says to Gianna.*

Next to the skylight is an old chair. Salvatore places it directly under the hatch, unhooks its holding device and folds it all the way out. He climbs onto the chair, sticks his head through the skylight and takes a quick look around outside. Then he pulls his head back in and says to Gianna:

*»The roof is flat enough! We'll go out here and back in at the neighbor's house!«*

*»Are you crazy? I'm afraid of heights!«*

*»Do you want to wait until the guy is in here?«*

Meanwhile, her pursuer has reached the attic door and begins to throw himself against the blocked door with his entire body weight. The whole attic reverberates from the rhythmic blows against the thin wood.



»Quick now! I'll go first.«

Salvatore squeezes his body through the skylight, grabs the outer metal frame with his hands and braces himself with his arms.

»Push me out!« he yells down to Gianna.

»I'll try!« she answers and grabs him by the dangling ankles.

With all her might, she pushes his legs upward. Groaning, he plops down like a wet sack on the brown roof tiles.

»Give me the backpacks now!«

Gianna hands him both backpacks through the hatch. She is still undecided whether she should really go up there.

»Now get on the chair and come out!«

Gianna hears that the sounds from the attic door suddenly sound different. The sofa has apparently given up its resistance and almost released the door. There is no alternative. She has to follow Salvatore. Trembling, she climbs onto the chair and sticks her upper body through the skylight. Salvatore grabs her under her arms from behind and pulls her with momentum through the hatch out onto the roof. The setting evening sun shines into her eyes and blinds her. The first thing she can recognize is the sloping roof in front of her, which ends abruptly at the gutter. Behind it is only the seemingly endless abyss to the courtyard. Gianna feels dizzy.

»We have to get over there!« Salvatore says. »I'm holding your hand! Don't look down! Take small steps! We can do this!«

Brick by brick, the two move along the sloping roof. Salvatore holds Gianna with his right hand and the two backpacks in his left. After a few meters, the tiles change both color and shape.

»I think this is where the neighbor's house starts. Now we have to find an entrance!«

The first roof hatch they reach is much too small for a human to fit through. The second one would be big enough, but it is firmly closed. Salvatore shakes it as hard as he can a few times, but quickly gives up.

*»Keep moving! We'll get in somewhere!«*

And indeed: The third hatch is tilted and can be opened wide enough that a person should fit through it. Salvatore throws the two backpacks downwards and says to Gianna:

*»Go ahead, you first!«*

In reverse gear, Gianna crawls into the roof hatch until she is only supported by her elbows on the frame. Salvatore grabs her by the forearms from the front and slowly lets her slide completely into the hatch. Then he lets her plop down.

*»Ow! That hurt!«* he hears Gianna scolding from below.

*»Look out! Now I'm coming!«* he calls to her.

Just like Gianna, he crawls feet-first into the hatch until only his upper body is peeking out of the roof.

*»Grab me by the feet and help me get on the ground!«* he calls to Gianna.

At that moment, he sees their pursuer sticking his head out of the skylight from which they had escaped.

*»Make it quick! He's seen us!«*

Salvatore drops and plops to the floor, without Gianna being able to slow down his impact much. At the same moment, a gunshot whips outside and a few fragments of the wall of a hit fireplace trickle through the skylight onto the floor.

*»He shot you!«* screams Gianna.

*»Let's get out of here! We have to go down the stairwell to the street.«*

*»Close the hatch!«*

Salvatore quickly locks the attic hatch as best he can. Then they both run to the attic door and look for the stairwell. Thank God, the houses here are all built quite similarly, so they quickly find their way around. Taking two steps at a time, they run down the stairs. At several apartments, they look into the frightened eyes of the residents. Apparently, they had heard the gunshot and wanted to ask their neighbors what was going on. Floor by floor they run down until they finally reach the front door and the street.

*»There's my scooter in front!« exclaims Gianna. »Put your backpack on your back and hold mine in your hand!«*

As soon as they reach the scooter, Gianna starts looking in the pockets of her jeans for the key.

*»Make it quick! The guy will surely be here soon!« Salvatore calls impatiently.*

But Gianna has already found the key. She lifts the Vespa off the center stand, inserts the key into the lock and presses the starter button. But a soft, hard cracking noise is all that the scooter emits.

*»Shit! The battery is dead. He's been doing that a lot the last few days. We need to kick it on!«*

Gianna heaves the scooter back onto the center stand and tries to push the kick starter through.

*»You do it!« she calls to Salvatore. »You have more power!«*

Salvatore firmly kicks the chrome lever down twice and the engine purrs. Gianna gets on and pushes the scooter off the stand again. Salvatore takes a seat behind her and they both whiz away as fast as they can. Just before they turn the first corner, three shots rip through the air behind them. That was close!

Gianna races through the alleys of Trastevere as she has never done before. As if the devil were after her, she gets a clear run, honking. At the Ponte

Palatino they cross the Tiber. On the other bank she sees the church of Santa Maria, where the whole drama had begun. If only she had never gone there! Then they wouldn't be in this mess now. On the long straight at the Circus Maximus she can finally roar along at full throttle. Inevitably, all the events of the last days and weeks go through her head again. How could she be so naive! She wanted to help justice win. And what did she get out of it? They shot at her and tried to kill her! If she should ever get out of this, she would act more carefully in the future. Absolutely! However, she would have to change then probably also her occupation! But she can forget that for the time being anyway. Let's see what the next weeks and months still hold for surprises for her.

After leaving the ruins of the Circus Maximus behind, Gianna brakes the Vespa again and turns left into Via di San Gregorio. She now sets course directly for Marco's secret hideout at the old central station. When they reach the Colosseum, Salvatore taps her on the shoulder from behind.

*»Stop the scooter, please!«*

*»What's going on? Why do you want me to stop?« she calls to the back.*

*»Stop it right now, please!« he shouts in her ear.*

Gianna stops the Vespa on the right side of the road and turns to Salvatore.

*»What's wrong?« asks Gianna in wonder.*

Salvatore tries to get off his pillion seat. But he only staggers and falls onto the sidewalk next to the road. Gianna cries out in horror:

*»Salvatore! What happened? You're bleeding!«*

Salvatore's shirt and pants are stained deep red under his backpack. The entire rear of the scooter is also covered in blood. When Gianna dismounts, she sees that the entire seat, including her pants, is also covered in blood. Gianna bucks the scooter up on the side of the road and bends down to Salvatore. He has meanwhile scrambled across the sidewalk to a

small wall and taken up a sitting position there. With his legs on the sidewalk, his back against the wall, and his gaze fixed on the ruins of the Colosseum, he sits there like a heap of misery.

*»I think the guy got me at the end! As we turned the corner, I felt a sharp pain back here on my back.«*

After Salvatore has taken off his backpack, Gianna sees the full extent of his wound. Everything is dripping with blood, and in the meantime a thin red trickle has made its way down the sidewalk toward the road.

*»Salvatore, we have to go to the hospital as soon as possible! You'll bleed to death otherwise!«*

*»Gianna I can't drive anymore. I almost fell off the scooter just now.«*

In the meantime, a few passers-by have gathered around them and asked if they could help. An older gentleman asks:

*»Did you have an accident with the motorcycle? I know a doctor who lives two streets away. Do you want me to go get him?«*

*Gianna answers desperately: »Yes please, get help as soon as possible! My friend is bleeding to death here otherwise!«*

The friendly gentleman walks as fast as he can in the direction from which he had come and is soon no longer to be seen. Meanwhile, Gianna searches in her backpack for a scarf. When she finds one, she carefully pulls Salvatore's shirt out of his pants and presses the cloth firmly on the wound.

*»Does that hurt?« she asks cautiously.*

Salvatore only shakes his head slightly.

*»Salvatore, you have to hold on now! The man will surely come back with the doctor and he will surely be able to stop the bleeding! Promise me that you will hold out until then!«*

*»Gianna, listen!« Salvatore whispers in her ear. »You have to promise me that you'll take good care of yourself! Get out of this damn town as fast as you can and don't come back until you're safe here again! Do you understand me?«*

*»Yes, yes, but right now we have to make sure you get back on your feet. Do you hear? I want to leave town with you, but first you have to get well again!«*

Salvatore's voice is getting weaker and weaker.

*»Gianna, I don't think I can go with you. Please let me wait here alone for the doctor. The people here are already taking care of me. See that you get to Marco and then as soon as possible leave the city ...«*

Gianna begins to sob while continuing to try to reason with her fainting friend. She tells him about the sea and the great new landscapes they might see on their escape. Of Abruzzo, Tuscany, Vesuvius, Etna and Sardinia. She tells him about all the places she had heard about in her life so far and wanted to see with her own eyes.

After listing almost the entire contents of a thick travel guide, she has to think briefly about whether she can think of another dream destination. At this moment, the older gentleman from earlier snaps her out of her thoughts:

*»Signorina, I brought the doctor with me!«*

The doctor, who is called in, looks skeptically at Salvatore, grabs his neck and checks his pupils.

*»I'm sorry! I fear I can not help this guy anymore. My condolences Signorina.«*

## **Battle of Kosovo**

Dragoš Ogarcović has finally had enough! How is a small farmer like him supposed to support his family when a bunch of lawless bandits steal his property every night? His neighbors in the village feel the same way.

Yesterday at the meeting, they argued heatedly for hours about how they could finally put a stop to these untenable conditions.

Their village is located in the Kosovo Field, north of the city of Pristina. They had always led a hard laborious life. Nature gave them what they needed to live. But not much more. They never got anything else for free here either. There were wars. Lots of wars! As far back as one could think here. But one was never starved here. The soil is fertile and those who work hard can also harvest someday. So it had always been. But now suddenly everything is different! Since millions of homeless migrants have made their way to Northern Europe, nothing in this region is as it used to be. As long as nation-states still existed, refugee flows were at least managed in a halfway orderly fashion. The Kosovo Field has always been a bottleneck on the great map of global migrations. But as long as no one stayed too long - and very few wanted to stay here - it was like coming and going at a big train station.

With the collapse of the states, everything had now changed. Nobody organizes the passage of the many desperate people from the south, who all, as before, have only one goal: Northern Europe. And many are now stuck here and don't know how to get on. Hide and wait. They have always been able to do that very well here. Partisan fighting was once brought to perfection in the Kosovo Field. But partisans have to eat. And refugees passing through also have to eat. And both of them get their food, one way or another.

There is not a farmer in the entire village who does not regularly have cattle stolen from his stables at night and whose pantries have not already been plundered. They can no longer let their wives and daughters go out into the fields alone. And who helps them to prevail against these parasites? No one. There is no one to help them. Self-help is the order of the day.

In the village meeting they had decided to defend themselves in the future. Those who did not yet have a weapon were given one by their neighbor.

There had never been a shortage of weapons in this area. They had also trained in their use during the last Balkan war. What they have to learn now is - to be silent. Silence about the things that are necessary now and that have to be done if they want to survive here. Only if everyone sticks together now and fights back together, they and their families will have a future here.

Shortly before midnight Dragoš sits in the dark chicken coop with his unlocked M76 assault rifle and waits. Yesterday at this time his dog had barked. Five minutes later he found him dying in front of the chicken coop. Stabbed to death!

Dragoš does not have to wait long. Slowly and quietly, the door of the chicken coop opens. The outline of a man is silhouetted against the dimly lit wall of the barn opposite. Dragoš does not hesitate. He aims his rifle right at the top center of the head and pulls the trigger. A shot whips through the night. The body of the chicken thief, which had been tense just a moment before, collapses lifelessly and no longer moves.

Together with his neighbor, the village headman, Dragoš takes the dead body on his cart to a small wood behind the village. Here they bury the body together a few meters off the path. No one will ever find him here.

Here in a small forest in the Kosovo Field, less than 300 kilometers from his Greek hometown of Saloniki, the journey and life of Jan Eckert's flatmate and friend - Georgios - ends tragically.

## **Giglio**

Thomas Prenninger waits in vain at the Hotel Villa Medici for David to return. As arranged, he finally fetches his suitcase from the reception desk and rushes off to the airport in Fiumicino with the boys from the Swiss Guard. The Learjet of the Vienna Central Bank is already parked on the apron, ready for takeoff. The boarding procedure is just as unspectacular as when they arrived. When the black minibus reaches the gate to the tarmac and the security guard recognizes the driver, he immediately opens the



gate. Without any formalities, the bus continues to the parked aircraft. The Swiss guardsmen still carry the suitcases over the gangway into the plane and say goodbye.

On the plane, Thomas Prenninger meets the same crew as on the outward flight. They are surprised that only one passenger appears instead of the two they were expecting. Thomas Prenninger briefly explains the situation to them and assures them that David will certainly be back soon from his sightseeing tour and that they can then take off immediately. Time passes and passes. Planes come and go. The one who doesn't come is David Jonas. Thomas Prenninger tells the crew about his stay in Rome and in particular about the extraordinary dinner his hosts had treated him to. Hour after hour passes until at some point the pilot says that he can't wait any longer because otherwise he will have problems with air traffic control. Thomas Prenninger is able to negotiate another quarter of an hour of waiting time. But when still no David Jonas has shown up, he gives the signal to leave. »That will teach him a lesson,« he thinks secretly, and imagines his colleague on the return flight in one of these pilgrim planes.

The takeoff is again very fast. The pilot accelerates on the runway in a southerly direction and then pulls into a wide right-hand turn over the deep blue sea. Thomas Prenninger sits in his thick leather chair with a salmon canapé in his left hand and a glass of champagne in his right, gazing at the sun, which is already red above the horizon. After the second glass of champagne, he brings his seat into a reclining position and after a minute he is fast asleep.

Many thousands of feet below them, somewhere in the rolling hills of Tuscany's Mediterranean coast, Niccolo Gasperi sits on his cart and slowly rocks toward his small homestead. All day he has toiled in his olive grove and now he is looking forward to the spaghetti his wife will cook for him tonight. His faithful horse knows the way, so Niccolo can let his eyes wander into the distance. For many kilometers, he can watch the course of the coastline. His grandfather had often told him about the times when the tourist industry still ruled down there and small farms inland, like theirs,

faced financial ruin. Thank God those days are long gone, Niccolo thinks to himself. Hard farm work is now worthwhile again in this area. On this coast, on the other hand, only fishermen and pirates can make a living.

In the haze of the sea, Niccolo faintly sees the outline of the island of Giglio. His grandfather often told stories about this island. At some point, one of these giant ships hit the offshore reef and capsized. Many people would have died, although the ship had not even sunk, but had only laid on its side. But Niccolo would not swear that all this was true. His grandfather had told fantastic stories too often. Especially when the red wine had tasted particularly good to him.

Behind Giglio, the sun slowly sinks into the sea. Like a huge red ball of fire, it stands above the horizon and soon threatens to go out. In front of the island, a lonely airplane slowly makes its way and also shines brightly in the last rays of the sun.

Suddenly, it seems to Niccolo as if the plane is turning into another fireball in the sky. Where a small silver dot had just been visible, a flock of bright fireflies now fall toward the earth and the sea like fireworks. After a few seconds they have reached the water and extinguish as quickly as they were created. All that remains in the sky is a large cloud of smoke that slowly begins to dissipate. After a few more seconds, Niccolo hears a soft dull bang. Then the haunting comes to an end. When he reaches his farm ten minutes later, he is already not sure whether this spectacle was real or whether his senses have played a trick on him. He swears to God that he will not take any more red wine with him to work in the fields in the next few weeks.

## **Language problems**

Gianna has been standing motionless next to the dead body of her friend Salvatore for quite a while. In the meantime, a large crowd has formed around the two. People begin to whisper and speculate about how this terrible accident might have happened. Gianna's thoughts are still with

Salvatore and she is saying goodbye. She is oblivious to everything that is happening around her.

Finally she pulls herself together and walks with the two backpacks to her Vespa, which is still parked on the side of the road. She shoulders her backpack and places Salvatore's on the floor panel so that she can hold it with her feet while driving. Then she presses the starter and the Vespa starts without problems. Before she speeds off, she calls out to the stunned crowd:

*»His name is Salvatore Pollini. He comes from Trastevere. Tell the police that the Vatican has him on its conscience!«*

A few passers-by try to stop her. But they are too late and only see her tail light disappearing in the darkness.

As Gianna circles the Colosseum, the gigantic stone ruin has already been almost completely swallowed up by night. She turns into the wide Via Cavour, which leads her straight into the even darker station area. Gianna had always avoided this part of town and can't even remember the last time she was here. But Marco had given her a good description of where she would find him and his cronies. Now she can only hope to reach the small street with the dilapidated hotel without being mugged. Fortunately, all goes well. In the headlights of her scooter she can decipher the old house numbers to some extent. This must be it! The facade and an old sign actually identify this ruin as a former hotel. There are neither windows nor doors on the ground floor. Where once sparkling clean glass fronts allowed a view into the well-kept interior, now everything is open and left to decay! Gianna drives her scooter through the former main entrance and parks it directly at the completely dusty reception counter. When she turns off the engine and with it the headlight, complete darkness and eerie silence surround her. It doesn't take long, however, for two figures with a lantern to come out of the stairwell. Apparently they had heard her rattling engine and want to see what's going on.

*»Who's there?« a dark male voice calls out.*

*»I'm Gianna Marconi and I'm here to see Marco from Trastevere!«*

Marco had expressly impressed upon her that no one here wants to be addressed by his last name. Since she can't know how many Marcos there are here, she attaches his place of origin to his first name.

*»Okay, I know about it. Come upstairs with me!« replies the lantern bearer.*

Gianna takes the two backpacks and follows the men into the stairwell. Without being able to recognize much, she climbs up step by step. First floor - second floor - third floor. Here they turn into a long corridor, at the end of which a flickering glow can be seen. They reach a large room where an estimated ten men are sitting around a table with a carbide lamp.

*»Welcome to our presidential suite. Marco here is a visitor for you!«*

Gianna sees one of the men jump up from his chair. Thank God! It is her Marco. He presses her against him and says:

*»I'm glad you're finally here. I was starting to worry. Why did you come alone? Where is Salvatore?«*

*In tears, Gianna answers: »Salvatore is dead! They shot him! Oh Marco, it's so terrible!«*

Marco doesn't even know what to say at first. If it wasn't so dark in the room, one could see that all color has drained from his face.

*»Come on, let's go over to my room. There you can tell me in private what happened.«*

Both leave the shared suite with a candle and go four rooms further. This room is obviously one of the hotel's many twin rooms. Blankets and two sleeping bags lie on the wide bed frame. There is not much left of the former furnishings. The closet no longer has any doors. The former bathroom obviously serves as a junk room. Gianna cannot recognize any other pieces of furniture. Only a picture above the bed, with the Colosseum

brightly illuminated at night, gives a hint of the former atmosphere of this city.

*»Sit here on my sleeping bag and tell me what happened,« Marco says in a calm voice.*

Gianna begins to recount in great detail the events of the past hours. Every now and then she is shaken by violent crying fits and can no longer talk. Marco recognizes that she is still in shock and does not probe further, so as not to open up more wounds in her. When he gets the impression that Gianna has gotten everything off her chest, he thinks helplessly:

*»Let's go back to the others. There's no point in moping around here. Life has to go on somehow.«*

After they rejoin the others, he briefly introduces Gianna to the people present, knowing that she can hardly remember all the first names of the dark faces.

*»Guys, this is Gianna. Please be nice to her! She's been through a lot today and needs to calm down first.«*

Most of the guys nod silently. One, however, says in a rather aggressive tone:

*»Listen Marco! We don't want your chick to make trouble for us. You're just a guest here! If your chick sends the cops after us, it's over!«*

*Marco replies loudly, as Gianna has never experienced him before: »Now you listen to me, boy! That I am your guest is one thing; I am also grateful to you. But if you insult me or my girlfriend, don't be surprised if I punch you in the face next time! There I understand no joke!«*

After this clear announcement, the positions seem to be clarified. Most of the people in the group look irritatedly at the floor, including the half-breed who has been addressed. Those who know Marco from earlier times know that he is a very reliable comrade, but that on the other hand one must not irritate him with impunity. After this short and unexpected verbal

exchange, there is an awkward silence. Until someone gets the idea to steer the conversation back into more harmless channels:

*»Gianna, what do you do all day? I mean professionally.«*

A few of those present snort with laughter, because this question sounds more like small talk at a high society standing reception and somehow doesn't fit into this precarious environment here at all. But Gianna answers as well as she can:

*»I normally work as a freelance journalist. At the moment, however, I'm having some personal problems, so I'm currently on sabbatical.«*

*»Do you know how to speak English, then?«*

*Marco answers for her: »Gianna speaks perfect English because she often researches on the Internet and there are very many pages available only in English. Moreover, she speaks German just as well because her father is from Germany. Nevertheless, she is of course a true Roman!«*

*»That's a good thing! Mohammad brought this half-dead German here today. He woke up from his coma earlier and is talking crazy, but nobody understands him!«*

*»You mean the poor sod they found lifeless in the backyard two blocks away with nothing but a piece of paper in his hand with our address and Mohammad's name on it?«*

*»Yes, exactly. Mohammad said he met him recently at his work and that he must be a distant relative of him!«*

*»Where is that camel driver now? Let him take care of this guy!«*

*»He's back on duty tonight in his slave suit and won't be back until tomorrow morning.«*

*Gianna spontaneously asks, »Where's that poor guy you're talking about?«*

*»Come with me. I'll take you to him.«*

Gianna gets up and is led into a small room at the other end of the hall. On one of the beds, a person lies motionless on his back, staring at the ceiling. The candle next to his bed spreads a dim light. What Gianna immediately notices is the white cloth wrapped turban-like around his head. When Gianna sits down next to the patient, he turns his head in her direction and looks at her with big dark eyes. Gianna tries to speak to him in German:

*»Hello, my name is Gianna. Can you understand me?«*

*»Yes, I can understand you! Who are you? Where am I?«*

*»You are in Rome. What's your name?«*

*»My name is David. David Jonas. I'm from Vienna.«*

## Part 2

### Betting debts

*You can not hold back the water and the people* <sup>13</sup>

Jan Eckert has resumed his business studies and is preparing for his first exams. During the day, he is still fully involved in caring for the elderly and needy people in his neighborhood. So he doesn't have much time for his studies. Every evening, he watches one or two of the available lecture videos on his computer. The notes he takes the old-fashioned way, on a paper-notepad, should help him later - he hopes - with his exam preparation. Often he discusses one topic or another over dinner with his friend and fellow student Patrick. Both are happy when they can philosophize a little about economic theories before going to bed after their exhausting duties. When Elena is at home, however, such topics of conversation are taboo. She can't hear any more of all that economic stuff. She has already made this clear to the two men several times. As soon as one of her flatmates doesn't comply, she disappears into her room in a huff.

Compared to the time before the economic crash, the number of students is very manageable. There are also only a few faculties, such as economics, that are eligible for this pilot phase. Other programs choose completely different - no less unconventional - training models for obtaining university degrees. The training of medical graduates now takes place only at the bedside and in the operating rooms of the former university hospitals.

What Jan misses most is the direct contact with his former lecturers. Although the books, scripts and videos impart a lot of knowledge, he often spontaneously has many questions that no one answers for him in this "distance learning". As often as possible, he therefore takes part in the various panel discussions that are organized at irregular intervals by the student council. Tonight there is a lecture in a large audimax on the topic:

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13 Proverb from Tuscany



*»Debt in the eurozone - Was the crash predictable?«*

The lecture is given by a certain Professor Karl Guggenmoser. Jan had never heard of him before. But a few of his fellow students had supposedly seen a few videos on YouTube before the crisis in which he took a very critical look at the European banking system and the euro crisis. When Jan enters the lecture hall half an hour before the presentation begins, there are only a few seats left. At the very front, directly in front of the wide wooden stage, he finds a free seat.

To his surprise, two of his former professors have also come and are now sitting next to the guest speaker on the podium. Actually, they are still released from their teaching duties. Apparently, however, they don't miss the opportunity to get back into science in their free time and breathe a little academic air.

Professor Guggenmoser begins his lecture. A representative of the student council sits nervously with a notebook computer next to the podium, trying to control the sequence of PowerPoint slides that are projected onto the large screen by the beamer. Karl Guggenmoser is an excellent speaker. He appears calm and restful and completely captivates the audience within a few minutes. Tall, elegantly dressed, slightly grayish hair. How old will he be? Jan estimates him to be perhaps in his mid-fifties. But it's not just his appearance that makes the audience follow his words so devoutly. His lecture is well structured and easy to understand even for non-experts. Starting with the monetary systems of antiquity, he covers a wide range of topics, including barter in the Middle Ages, the major world economic crises of the past, the emergence of the European Monetary Union, the debt crisis, and the major collapse of the global economic system. At the end of his presentation, there is a reverent silence before the entire lecture hall starts clapping, tapping, stomping and whistling deafeningly.

After some calm has returned, one of the professors grabs the microphone and takes over the moderation of the upcoming discussion round:

*»Dear Professor Guggenmoser! Thank you very much for your very interesting remarks. Or to speak with Richard Wagner's<sup>14</sup> words: Who would have thought it, what quite word and lecture do! I think we all, as we are gathered here, have learned a lot from you today about history and economics and especially how much these two fields of science are inseparably interwoven. It is a pity that you did not give this lecture in the German parliament a few years ago. The ladies and gentlemen there might then have been able to turn things around in time and we would not be in this awkward situation today in which we now unfortunately find ourselves.«*

The audience starts clapping loudly and the professor has to wait a few minutes before continuing:

*»I'm sure some of our students have a few more questions for you, and I'd like to open the discussion here. Who dares to be the first?«*

The student council representative passes a microphone to a student who has stood up in the third row.

*»Professor Guggenmoser. The Federal Republic of Germany has always been considered a model economic country within the European Union. We had our unemployment under control, were able to reduce new debt to zero and even started to reduce our existing national debt. How could it happen that we, just like all our neighbors, were caught by this economic crisis?«*

Karl Guggenmoser listens attentively and then takes the microphone:

*»Thank you very much for this very good question! You are absolutely right. For years, we Germans were under the illusion that we were doing everything right, while the others - i.e. the Greeks, the Spanish, the Italians and the French - only ever wanted to keep their economies going on credit. We Germans always pointed an admonishing finger at such formal things as the Maastricht criteria, which others - like us - were supposed to comply with. However, due to the construction of the euro, these requirements could not be met by many countries. As long as*

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14 Richard Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg - Stolzing's Preislied

*these countries were trapped in the euro, they fell further and further behind the economically strong northern states. Germany was able to boost its exports and create jobs, while the southern European countries now had to buy these goods on credit from abroad. But how do credits work? Someone has to be responsible for paying back the money borrowed. And who guaranteed these loans? Ultimately, the German population! The German savers! In principle, our government has made a long-term bet, like a hedge fund, that the euro will remain the single European currency. As long as such a bet goes well, you can make a lot of money. After all, we succeeded in doing so for years, as could be seen from the low unemployment figures, the rising share prices and the export records that increased from year to year. But unfortunately, this game cannot be continued indefinitely! The first warning signal was the interest rate level, which has sunk lower and lower. To a certain extent, this also led to a revival of the economy, because even ailing companies were able to obtain fresh loans virtually for free. But in the end, this only artificially delayed company bankruptcies. Because companies that were actually no longer able to earn their cost of capital were kept artificially alive by these cheap loans. But this negative interest rate policy inevitably drove the banks to ruin. What else were they supposed to earn their money with? With bad loans? With investments that do not yield any interest? The German state, of course, tried with all its might to keep this bet on keeping the euro going as long as possible. But with the collapse of the banks on a broad front, this bet was finally lost. And then it became really expensive! Extremely expensive!«*

In the back row, a young man speaks up. When he is handed the microphone, he wants to know:

*»In a bet, the maximum you can lose is your stake. How high was this bet and why did it end up being so expensive for us Germans?«*

Karl Guggenmoser nods his head and answers after a short pause:

*These types of bets are not like the ones you know from your everyday life. Here, people usually work with so-called levers in*

*order to be able to achieve a higher profit. This means that you borrow money and make a bet with it, hoping that everything will go well. If the bet does not fail, you will make a big profit. But if it goes wrong, you suddenly have to shell out real money. These constructs are also called derivatives. The famous investor Warren Buffet once accurately described these derivatives as financial weapons of mass destruction long before the crash. When Germany's bet on the existence of the euro was lost, the German Bundesbank had to write off loans in unimaginable amounts. Loans that it had extended to the other central banks of Europe, which in turn had financed their countries' debts. Just like the Deutsche Bundesbank, institutional investors such as insurance companies and banks also collapsed. Almost all of their claims were based on the euro, and when it was no longer worth anything, they had to write off these claims. Not to mention the small investors and savers who lost their money in the same way. Basically, countries like Germany were just playing for time at the expense of other countries. In the end, however, they were just as unable as all other countries to escape the global collapse.«*

Jan sees many perplexed faces around him. It all sounds quite logical what the man in front is telling. But if it were all so simple, why didn't anyone take countermeasures in time? Why did they let the cart hit the wall so unchecked? Jan suspects that the interrelationships are probably much more complex this man would make them believe.

Meanwhile, another student is asking:

*»Professor Guggenmoser, I once saw a video of you advocating a reset of the global world economy based on a new domain system. Can you tell us something about this domain system?«*

Karl Guggenmoser begins to grin and shakes his head somewhat sheepishly. It is obvious he wasn't expecting this question. After a brief pause for thought, he carefully begins to formulate his answer:

*»I think that is beyond the scope of this event. But allow me to say a few basic words about this thought model that I once put forward some time ago: It is a fact that our former economic and*

*financial system has collapsed worldwide and needs to be replaced as quickly as possible by a new system - one that works as well as possible. It is also a fact that our former nation states, which bear the full responsibility for this collapsed system, have proven to be completely incapable of acting. On all my lecture tours I see the same picture: It's the small communities, like yours here in Cologne, which are trying with a lot of commitment of their citizens to organize the survival of the people and a rebuilding of the economic structures. The state as such no longer exists! Nowhere! Not in Germany, not in Europe and also not in all other highly developed countries of this earth. The nation states have de facto vanished. So what can we do to regain individual prosperity and security as quickly as possible? We must manage - and without frictional losses - to network the reinvigorated structures, such as yours here in Cologne. No one can survive alone in the long run! We learned that long ago in our human history. But what is the most effective way to interconnect autonomous, small-scale economic centers? By ethnicity? By religion? By skin color? In what framework do we want to represent our interests? Do we want to return to a state in which Cologne citizens risk their lives to defend the freedom of people in the Hindu Kush? Is that what you really want?«*

The students look at each other helplessly and don't quite know what Karl Guggenmoser is getting at.

*»My proposal has a very simple goal: You base your networking on given structures. Structures that cannot be challenged. Structures that cannot be changed by wars and individual power interests. If we succeed in channeling our human creative power exclusively into building our common prosperity and not into fighting territorial conflicts, then we will be successful at the end of the day! This is the basic idea of the domain system! An economic restart with the acceptance of consistent territorial frameworks.«*

Again, there is a perplexed silence in the auditorium. A student goes to the microphone and asks:

*»How do they imagine these unchanging territorial borders? Those of 1945 or those after the French Revolution or after the fall of the Berlin Wall?«*

The audience in the hall seems amused. Some clap, some shout boos. Professor Guggenmoser also can't help laughing out loud, but then becomes serious again and answers:

*»It makes no sense at all to be guided by any boundaries from the past. In the history of mankind, there have never been any borderlines that have not at some point become the subject of dispute. My first idea of how to define natural boundaries was rivers. Since time immemorial, rivers have served as natural borders between countries. A river is a natural barrier. It separates two territories and prevents the enemy neighbor from entering one's own territory. So, at first glance, the course of rivers could be a possible candidate. But then I very quickly came to the conclusion that this does not work in practice! Why does it not work? Take an atlas and try to define territories that are bounded by river courses. You will quickly realize that this does not work! The further you follow a river in the direction of its source, the more small tributaries it fans out. Where do you want to draw the borders there? And what will you do at the sources? With this approach, you very quickly end up back at arbitrary decisions about which river courses should serve as boundaries. If we look back at our recent past, we have often been faced with the question of where Germany ends. At the Oder? At the Memel? At the Meuse? At the Rhine? I discarded the idea with the rivers and the natural borders and almost forgot about it. Until one day I saw a map with the European river systems and watersheds. At that moment it suddenly became clear to me: The rivers are the right way! But you should not define the rivers, which are the lowest points of a landscape, as the border, but the mountain ranges! Each river, which flows into the sea at any place of the globe, forms a so-called river system, from which it feeds. Each water drop which falls from the sky on the earth lands in exactly one river system! His way up to the sea is exactly predetermined to him. In the normal case it seeps through the ground up to a small brook, which flows into a large brook at some point, the*

*brook flows into a river, the river becomes a stream and at some point our drop of water lands at the mouth of the stream in the sea. The boundaries between the different river systems are called watersheds. And these watersheds have exactly the characteristic I have been looking for. They are clearly defined and unchanging! You would have to move whole mountain ranges to change the course of a river system! In summary one can say: The domain system, which I presented in my thought model, is based on the interconnection of autonomous economic centers, which interlace themselves within unchangeable territorial borders. And these territorial boundaries are based on the only natural boundaries we have on our planet - watersheds.«*

With these words, Karl Guggenmoser ends his presentation on the domain system and answers a few more questions about his lecture. Jan, however, is already hardly listening. From now on, his thoughts only circle around this crude domain theory of Professor Guggenmoser. Does something like this make sense? Can something like that work? Jan decides to pick up an atlas tomorrow and take a look at the map of Germany.

## **Suitcase bomb**

Boris Luganov was somewhat irritated. His stay in Rome had actually begun quite promisingly. He had gotten along well with his contact right from the start. At first he could not believe his eyes. A clergyman! A monsignor! Boris Luganov had never had a very intimate relationship with the Church. And this Roman Catholic Church seemed to him, as a native Russian, to be a very special club. Nevertheless, the chemistry between Monsignor Scarelli and him had been right from the start. The man knew exactly what he wanted. And he also seemed to know no scruples in the pursuit of his goals.

Apparently, he had the full confidence of the organization. A number of strategic operations were pending, which Scarelli was to coordinate from the Vatican. Boris Luganov had been entrusted with the execution and was to use his two-week stay in Rome to work out the detailed operational

plans with Scarelli. Everything had started quite promisingly. Until Scarelli was suddenly disturbed in his work by two internal problems.

One story was probably more of a trifle. Two Roman journalists were on the trail of a small bribery scandal and wanted to make a mountain out of a molehill. Normally, a man like Monsignor Scarelli would not have been bothered with such a thing. But since he wanted to keep the Vatican Bank out of the headlines at all costs, the matter was declared a matter for the boss. In the end, however, an internal solution to the problem was found and Luganov was kept out of the matter.

The second problem was of far greater dimension. At the same time that Scarelli and Luganov were busy preparing their operation, two spies from the Danube domain had gained access to the Vatican Bank's database servers under the pretext of a project meeting. The two had actually managed to discover the organization's black money transfers. Had this explosive data leaked out, it would have jeopardized the entire ongoing operation. The monsignor had no other choice but to entrust Boris Luganov with the elimination of this problem.

Even for Luganov, this task had been a real challenge. Not because of the task, but because of the very sporty schedule. In the morning, the spies had been uncovered by the attention of an IT manager. In the afternoon, Scarelli had consulted with his crisis team and decided on the elimination of the two spies. At the end of that meeting, Luganov was called in. After another hour, the execution plan was set, which they did not have twenty-four hours to carry out.

The two spies were to fall victim to a bomb explosion during their flight back to Vienna. Under no circumstances was the Vatican to be the scene of this fake act of terrorism. Luganov drew up a list of ingredients he needed to build the bomb. Then came the hard part: the suitcase of one of the spies had to be replaced during the trip to the airport. For more than an hour, Luganov and Scarelli watched the surveillance videos from the lobby of the Villa Medici hotel. Until they finally found a hotel guest who had



arrived with the same suitcase as this Mr. Prenninger. The hotel director was of course not thrilled when he had to have this suitcase taken from the guest's room. Finally, however, he complied with the instructions and did what he had been told to do. Luganov then spent the whole night mixing the explosives and building a suitable detonator. He always had some basic equipment in his luggage for such cases, but the art of his business lay in creating a tailor-made solution from a few standard components. When dawn broke, his work was almost complete. While one of the spies made his rounds of the hotel pool, Boris Luganov ran a few final tests on the detonator of his completed suitcase bomb. Finally, he handed the suitcase over to the Swiss guardsmen and instructed them how to make the inconspicuous exchange. As the black minibus made its way from the hotel to the airport, Luganov was already there, waiting within sight of the private jet for the two spies to arrive. As discussed, the Swiss guardsmen had exchanged the real suitcase for the prepared one when unloading the minibus. Unfortunately, not everything went according to plan. When the minibus stopped at the plane, Luganov could see two suitcases but only one passenger through his binoculars. Where the hell had the other man gone? The plane's takeoff was also delayed seemingly endlessly. Luganov had been told that the plane would take off on time at three o'clock. Now the sun was setting soon and the Learjet still stood motionless in parking position. Luganov was already worried that the passenger might get bored, and as a result, he might then open his supposed travel suitcase. In that case, the bomb would have detonated on the spot, which would not have been in the interest of his clients. Finally the plane did taxi toward the runway. Boris Luganov activated the bomb's timer by radio and drove back to the Vatican. He could not be blamed for the fact that only one of the passengers was on board. The other spy still had to be in Rome. »What the hell!« thought Boris Luganov. »Maybe this will result in another lucrative follow-up job!«

## Everything flows

Jan Eckert has successfully completed his first exams. He proudly hung the first certificates above the bed in his room. The flatmates have also had a new addition: Kevin recently moved into the shared apartment and now lives in Georgios' former room, which was vacant since he left for Greece.

Kevin had already completed his bachelor's degree in computer science before the crisis. But he then left Cologne during the hunger winter and now returned to the city to continue his studies. Regular lectures are still out of the question, even at his faculty. Instead, Kevin is working with other IT specialists from the city of Cologne to be able to offer residents a halfway functioning Internet again. Actually, it's more of an intranet, since there are still no router connections to network nodes outside the city. For now, his team is just setting up a small network of servers and creating a rudimentary web portal for the city, where citizens can find information about all things related to daily life. Of course, the computer science students should not have to do without the possibility of an official university degree. The exam committee therefore makes life easy for itself by drawing from the vast pool of IT certifications available in the private sector. They simply use the exam questions that they once got hold of in dubious ways a long time ago and now award their own university certificates on the basis of them.

One Sunday, the flatmates join forces to cook lunch together. After dessert, a lively discussion begins among the young people, as Patrick asks rather casually into the round:

*»What do you guys think about this domain system that God and the world is talking about?«*

*Elena replies annoyed: »Patrick, how many times do I have to tell you? No business topics here at the kitchen table!«*

*»But that has only marginally to do with economics!« he quickly replies. »It's about how we humans want to organize ourselves and interact with each other in the future.«*

*Jan says, »Well, I recently saw Karl Guggenmoser, who came up with this idea, in person at a panel discussion at the university. The man has a clue, I think. But what he said there about his natural territorial borders was pretty out of touch, if you ask me.«*

*Kevin adds: »My IT colleagues are talking about nothing else at the moment. The topic seems to be tremendously polarizing. Some think it's totally great, others think it's complete nonsense.«*

*Elena responds, »If you ask me, this guy is an absolute phony who takes advantage of people's distress to spread his muddled theories among the population.«*

*Patrick counters: »I wouldn't say that. In the Cologne City Council, they are very open to these theories. There is now also cooperation with the city of Rotterdam. The city councils of both cities met and agreed on bilateral trade relations. In the refineries of Rotterdam, for example, there are still large quantities of diesel and gasoline stored that we could urgently use here in Cologne. I think it's totally great that both cities have now joined forces to form a Rhine domain for the benefit of their citizens.«*

*Kevin laughs: »We and the Dutchmen? That can't go well in the long run!«*

*But Patrick replies: »Would you rather transport the crude oil here from Bavaria? Have fun with today's transport possibilities! In Rotterdam, they just have to dump the diesel into one of the transport ships lying around there anyway and then send it up the Rhine to us!«*

*Elana intervenes: "You can't just look at this particular situation here in Cologne. How is such a river domain system supposed to work in my Spanish homeland? I took a look at it on the atlas. We have five major river systems there. Four rivers flow - partly via Portugal - into the Atlantic. The Ebro flows into the Mediterranean. Both Madrid and Lisbon are in the catchment area of the Tagus. Should these two cities now form a domain? Surely that would lead to murder and manslaughter between Spaniards and Portuguese! And what about Barcelona? It's right*

*on the sea, without any river system even nearby! That's all complete humbug!«*

*Jan cradles his head and says, »Why shouldn't two cities like Lisbon and Madrid complement each other well? One is located by the sea and can handle cross-domain trade relations in the future. The other metropolis is centrally located inland and is ideally suited as an administrative center. No one is saying that the people of Madrid must now become Portuguese or that the people of Lisbon must speak Spanish. It's just a matter of creating a stable framework for the rapid development of trade relations.«*

*»Which brings us back to your stupid economic topics!« says Elena, offended.*

*Patrick, on the other hand, says: »Speaking of Barcelona, the Catalans have wanted to separate themselves from Spain for years. Their isolated location beyond the other river systems suits them just fine! They can finally do their own thing and choose their cooperation partners at will! Or they create a metropolitan region of Barcelona and connect it with the nearby Ebro domain!«*

*»You have absolutely no idea what you are talking about. Catalans define themselves primarily by the regions where their language is spoken, not by some bullshit watersheds in the landscape!«*

With that, she angrily leaves the room and goes to her room. The three men just grin at each other. Kevin, however, keeps the topic of conversation alive:

*»What should happen to the cities that are located exactly on a border between two domains?«*

*Patrick answers with growing enthusiasm: »In principle, you first have to distinguish between main domains and subdomains. Take my hometown of Wetzlar as an example. That's where the Dill flows into the Lahn. One could discuss whether Wetzlar belongs to the Dill sub-domain or to the Lahn sub-domain. But this is actually irrelevant, because the Lahn flows into the Rhine and*

*Wetzlar is thus clearly located in the main domain of the Rhine. The Rhine is a main domain because it flows into the sea. "Lahn.Rhine" forms a first order sub-domain and "Dill.Lahn.Rhine" forms a second order sub-domain covering the entire catchment area of the Dill. At the inland river mouths one always has transitions of different hierarchy levels. But this is not critical, because everything belongs to a common main domain.«*

*»But what if a city is now right on the border of two main domains?« Jan asks curiously. »What then? To which main domain should it then belong?«*

*Patrick leans back with relish, grins at his roommates and replies, »Name me a city! Look in the atlas and name me a single city in this world to which that applies!«*

## **Headlines**

David has had a quiet night. The sleep has done him good. When he wakes up in the morning and the sun shines brightly on his mattress, his headache has almost disappeared. Where is he here? Why isn't he in his apartment? Everything looks so different. Everything smells so different. What has happened?

A pretty angel with dark curly hair enters his room and asks him nicely:

*»Would you like a cup of coffee?«*

Slowly, David's memory comes back. He had gone to Rome on a business trip. He had seen the young woman before. But why is he here now? In this room? What is that on his head? He begins to carefully feel his head and the bandage with his hands, and the young woman says to him:

*»You'd better not do that. I'd be careful with that bump on the head!«*

Gianna had gotten up early in the morning. The boys had made a large pot of coffee on a gas stove and then disappeared one by one from the ruined hotel. Most seemed to be engaged in some activity, at least during the day. Only the unsympathetic half-wit who had gotten into a fight with Marco

yesterday and another young man whom Gianna had never seen before remain in the hotel. The two seem to have some kind of guard duty and patrol the whole morning through the spacious building.

*»Can you tell me what happened?« David asks the young woman.*

*»You've been beaten up. Your cousin supposedly brought you here. But he should tell you himself when he comes. I've only been here since yesterday myself, and I don't even know your cousin yet.«*

*»My cousin?« David asks, irritated. Then he slowly begins to remember again. »Oh yes, the young man from the restaurant. Mohammad.«*

*»You don't seem to be very close relatives!« Gianna wonders.  
»But at least he saved your life! Without him, you would have died out there!«*

David now remembers again how he had taken a cab to this deserted train station. How the cab driver had expressly warned him and how he suddenly found himself face to face with the three thugs in the dark courtyard entrance. He can no longer remember what happened next. The thing must have ended however rather badly. If he interprets his bump on the back of the head correctly.

*»How long was I unconscious?«*

*»As far as I know, one of the boys found you yesterday in a backyard near here. He then fetched Mohammad and he brought you here. You were then in a coma for many hours and woke up sometime during the night.«*

*»Aw crap, then my plane is gone now!«*

*»What's gone?« Gianna asks irritated.*

*»My plane. I should have flown back to Vienna yesterday afternoon. Now they must have departed without me!«*

*»You may have problems!« Gianna says with little understanding.  
»Now drink your coffee and call me if you need anything. I'm just  
a few rooms away.«*

Then she goes back to the large empty community suite, which she apparently has to herself this morning. Actually, she wanted to make herself useful for the community. Putting away dishes, washing up or something along those lines. But she finds neither a kitchen nor a functioning bathroom. There are also no dishes standing around. It looks more like each of the guys has his cup from which he drinks his coffee in the morning and his tea in the evening. That's all they seem to need.

Meanwhile, David remains lying on his bed and thinks. How will he get home again? The best thing is to go directly to the airport and find out about the next flight there. But perhaps it would be more clever to drive back to the Vatican first, have a connection picked out at the hotel and then spend the waiting time there. It would be more pleasant than waiting at the airport, especially since it might take a while until the next plane leaves for the north. That he gets a direct flight, he can probably forget. Apparently there are only these pilgrim flights to Rome and no regular flight schedule like in the northern domains. The main thing is that he gets away from here first. The connecting flight to Vienna will certainly not be a big problem anymore.

Then a young man comes into his room and greets him grinning in Arabic:

*»Good morning, Daoud! Are you feeling well again?«*

At first glance, David does not recognize Mohammad at all. He looks completely different today, without his slave cloak and sandals. Now he wears washed-out jeans, a colorful T-shirt and sneakers.

*»Hello Mohammad! Yes, I am alive again. And I owe you a great  
debt of gratitude!«*

*»It's all right. How's your head?«*

*»Still droning on a bit, but it'll come around.«*

*»How did that happen?« Mohammad wants to know.*

*»I don't know that exactly either. The last seconds before the blow on my head are missing in my memory. In any case, I was on my way to you and got into a backyard. Suddenly there were three thugs in front of me who cut me off. I remember running away. What came after that?«*

David shrugs his shoulders, but quickly lets it go, because it doesn't seem to do his head any good at all.

*»What did these guys look like?« Mohammad asks.*

*»Not particularly tall. Short dark hair. Two had, I think, a baseball bat or something like that in their hands.«*

*»My guess is that it was the Torretti brothers. The group they live with controls the area with the courtyard where you were found. I'm surprised, though, that they bludgeoned you so brutally. Didn't they say anything?«*

*»The biggest of them yelled something in my face just before he pushed me to the ground. I can't say what, though. I hardly understand a word of Italian. I then tried to run away.«*

*»He probably asked you, in his own friendly way, to let him have your money,« Mohammad says with a grin. »Those three don't like it at all when you just ignore their wishes. What valuables did you have with you?«*

*»My wallet, my ID and my wristwatch,« David responds.*

*»How much money?« Mohammed wants to know.*

When David tells him the amount he had exchanged at the hotel, he whistles softly through his teeth and says:

*»You were lucky there. People do get killed for that kind of money around here! You were pretty careless!«*

*»If you know these guys, do you think I can get my stuff back?«*



*»Forget it!« Mohammad responds, shaking his head. »The individual groups here stay out of each other's way as best they can. Since the incident happened on their turf, no one will want to interfere here.«*

*»But what about my ID card? They can't do anything with it. I need it to get back home!«*

*»Forget it, I say! Official paper from northern European domains is in hot demand on the black market here. It'll probably fetch them more than your cash and watch.«*

David sighs. This is going to be more complicated than he thought. Now he has to go back to the Vatican in any case to have replacement papers issued. All the formal stuff will surely take a while again and delay his return flight even more. Everything is really going wrong at the moment!

*»By the way,« Mohammad continues. »I just came from my father. I told him we met and all the things you told me about your family.«*

*»And?« David replies excitedly. »How did he react? Can we meet sometime?«*

*»I'll have to disappoint you on that one. He listened to everything and then decided that he didn't want to see you. Please don't take it personally. I think he is afraid of reopening old wounds. Maybe he will change his mind again.«*

David can hardly hide his disappointment. He would have loved to meet his lost uncle. If he had known that beforehand, he would have been spared all this inconvenience and would already be back in Vienna.

At that moment, Gianna comes into the small room. She has heard voices and wants to see who David is talking to.

*»Ciao, I'm Gianna. And you are probably Mohammad. Right?«*

*»Ciao. Yes. Do we know each other?«*

*»I am a friend of Marco and I expect to stay here for a few days.«*

*»That's right! Marco had said something the other day,«  
Mohammad recalls. »Didn't you guys want to come in pairs?«*

*»Something came up, I'm afraid,« Gianna said with a lowered  
gaze.*

She has not the slightest desire to talk to two strangers about the tragic events of the past day. Instead, she steers the conversation into more innocuous channels and soon a lively German-Italian-Arabic conversation develops between the three, depending on who is talking to whom at the moment. Gianna translates from Italian into German, David from German into Arabic and Mohammad from Arabic into Italian. There is an indescribable confusion of languages. By the time evening comes, the three have become friends and each knows the rough life story of the other. Gianna, however, had become quite monosyllabic when the conversation briefly turned to her current situation. The two men had quickly realized that they were touching a sore spot and changed the subject.

Shortly before it gets dark, Marco comes home from his work. He now has a much longer way to work from here. Gianna had offered him her Vespa and he had accepted this offer with thanks. As he walks down the hallway on the third floor of the ruined hotel, he hears the multilingual gibberish of the three of them from far away. He joins them and listens for a while. Gianna quickly notices, however, that he seems somehow depressed.

*»Marco, is something wrong?« she asks him.*

He opens his bag and pulls out the current issue of La Città. Wordlessly, he points to one of the three big headlines on the front page:

**Serious motorcycle accident at the Colosseum!**

*A serious motorcycle accident occurred yesterday at the traffic circle of the Colosseum. The driver of a Vespa lost control of her vehicle due to carelessness and due to greatly excessive speed. In the subsequent fall, her passenger Salvatore P. was injured so badly that he succumbed to his serious injuries at the scene of the accident. The driver committed hit-and-run and left her injured passenger to his fate. According to police investigations, the*

*driver of the accident is a certain Gianna Marconi. She has not yet been apprehended. A reward of RL 100,000 has been offered for the capture of the fugitive. Any police station will be pleased to receive any relevant information.*

Gianna holds her hands over her mouth in horror. She can't believe what she can read there with her own eyes.

*»Those miserable bastards! Now they want to blame me for Salvatore's death, too! They even put a picture of me next to the article. As if I were a criminal! Salvatore bled to death from the gunshot wound that this Vatican killer inflicted on him! I didn't have any accident with the scooter! And there were plenty of witnesses there who must have seen what happened!«*

David can't really make sense of what is happening here. He can neither read this Italian newspaper article nor interpret Gianna's hysterical screaming. However, when he takes another look at the newspaper page, his eyes get caught on something completely different. Just a few centimeters from Gianna's picture, he discovers his own face.

*»But that's me!« he exclaims, horrified. »What does it say?«*

**Escaped felon wanted!**

*Yesterday, multiple child murderer Silvio M. managed to escape from Regina Coeli prison. A reward of RL 100,000 has been offered for the capture of the fugitive. Any police station will be pleased to receive any relevant information.*

After Gianna has translated the text for him, he is speechless at first. Then he shakes his head and says:

*»How do they come to print such nonsense there? That's clearly me in the picture! This picture was taken in the lobby of the Hotel Villa Medici. You can still see the palm tree and the small fountain in the background! Why do they put my picture next to the mugshot of such a criminal?«*

Mohammad doesn't know what to say at all. Finally, he means half in jest:

*»Well, I've fallen into some illustrious company. I hope that at least the third headline in this rag has nothing to do with our luxury hotel here.«*

*»No,« Gianna replies. »Sometimes terrible things happen outside of Rome that have nothing to do with us.«*

And she translates the article of the third big headline into German for David:

**Plane crash over the Tyrrhenian Sea**

*For reasons still unknown, a private jet coming from Rome crashed into the sea yesterday near the island of Giglio. According to consistent witnesses, the plane exploded in the air. On board were, in addition to the two-man crew, the two IT specialists Thomas P. and David J., who were returning to Vienna from a working visit to the Vatican. Pirate ships have recently been spotted in the region around the crash site, which, according to reliable intelligence information, are also said to have high-flying anti-aircraft missiles. Security at Giovanni Paolo II Airport is still considered adequate. Security authorities do not believe there was a terrorist attack. The Vatican expressed shock at this terrible accident and telegraphed condolences from the Pope to Vienna.*

## **Coup**

In the meantime, more than a year has passed. In many German cities, there is an unprecedented mood of optimism. In addition to Cologne and Rotterdam, the Rhine Domain economic alliance now also includes the cities of Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Zurich. Since the supply of crude oil has been secured, the economy is running like clockwork again. The oil-exporting countries had only been waiting to finally find buyers for their black gold. More tankers arrive at the port of Rotterdam than can be handled.

Since agriculture once again has sufficient diesel fuel for its machines, the amount of food produced even exceeds the needs of the population. So much is produced that food can be exported abroad via the port in

Rotterdam. At present, the main customers are crude oil suppliers. One barrel of oil has the equivalent value of ten liters of milk.

Public transportation is also working smoothly and reliably again. Just this weekend, Jan visited his mother and sister in his old hometown. The two of them are doing really well again. His mother now manages the branch of a newly opened shopping center. His sister Anna has started an apprenticeship at the city administration and volunteers in a hospice association in her spare time. Jan is always amazed at how grown-up and independent his little sister has become. There is no longer any trace of her former childlike naiveté. She has grown into a young, self-confident woman who obviously knows exactly where she wants to go in life. Tough on herself and, if necessary, tough on others.

Public life has picked up enormously again throughout the region. In the former buildings of the WDR<sup>15</sup>, the New Rhenish Wave has started broadcasting. Music, news and sports results, among other things, are broadcast on three different radio channels. A television program has also recently gone back on the air. Most of the broadcasting time is reserved for repeats of old feature films. However, the talk shows on current political topics are most popular.

One evening, as Jan Eckert is preparing for an upcoming study exam in his room, Kevin suddenly comes storming into the shared apartment, excited.

*»Have you heard what's going on out there? Turn on the TV!«*

The four flatmates gather in their shared living room and switch on the TV. An army soldier in officer's uniform appears on the screen, reading a preconceived text from a sheet of paper with a serious look on his face.

*»The security of the citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany and the sovereignty of our fatherland is threatened as never before. Our goal is to overcome this all-encompassing crisis, chaos and anarchy in our country and to restore the unity of the Federal Republic of Germany. For this reason, a state of emergency is being declared throughout the entire area covered*

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15 WDR: West German Broadcasting

*by the German Basic Law, effective immediately. All regional governments must submit to the command of the new interim government with immediate effect. All treaties negotiated with foreign governmental organizations in recent months will be declared temporarily invalid and must be confirmed by the transitional government before they can be reinstated. My fellow citizens! I appeal to your civic duty to do everything in your power to ensure that our people can once again live united in security and prosperity. Follow the instructions that will be announced by the interim government through the media in the coming hours. Do not believe the false promises of the traitors to the fatherland who would have you believe that a restoration of security and order would be possible outside the legal order of the Federal Republic of Germany. Reflect on your civic duties. Your country now needs the support of each and every one of you. Do not hesitate! Support to the best of your ability the brave soldiers of the German Armed Forces who will do everything to guarantee law and order in this country of ours once again. God save Germany!"*

After the officer has finished reading his text, a black-red-gold flag waving in the wind appears on the screen and the German national anthem begins to sound loudly. After the music stops, the whole thing starts over again. The TV spot is broadcast in an endless loop.

*»What's that all about?« Jan asks irritably. »Is this satire or is it real?«*

*»Of course it's real!« Kevin replies. »The broadcasting building at the Cathedral has been occupied by the military. Shots were reportedly fired. There were supposedly several dead! The Cologne City Council has gone into hiding and has called on all residents of Cologne to resist. Barricades are being erected in the streets and people are demonstrating. Most of the people of Cologne are on the side of the council and condemn the military coup. But there are also supporters. Two opposing demonstration marches clashed at the Heumarkt. There was a mass brawl with dozens injured!«*

*»Who is behind this coup attempt?« asks Jan.*

*»Allegedly, some members of the last federal government in Berlin. It is said that they were only waiting for the existence of a media infrastructure that was functioning again to put their plan into action.«*

*»Where did all these soldiers suddenly come from?« Patrick wants to know. »After all, the German army ceased to exist after the big crash, when there was no money left to pay the soldiers."*

*Kevin replies: »It's completely unclear right now how many people are involved in this coup. Supposedly, the military has taken over the broadcasting stations in all the former state capitals and is broadcasting the commercial you just saw from there. So it may be that it's just a manageable group of reactionary forces. Or maybe they have managed to mobilize a real army. At the moment, everything is unclear and unconfirmed.«*

Jan briefly considers what it would mean if these putschists actually came back to power now. Then he announces:

*»Well, I don't know how you see it. But I'm not going to sit around here and do nothing. If these criminals who got us into all this now want to restore their old system, then we must try to prevent that. I'm going out onto the streets and join the demonstrations. Let them see on whose side the people are!«*

*Elena agrees with him: »My parents told me that there was also once a coup attempt by the military in Spain after the end of Franco's dictatorship. But the people and the king stood together against the putschists and helped justice win! I will go with you to the streets and fight for our cause!«*

*Patrick is also determined: »For over a year now, I've been trying to convince all my friends and relatives of the advantages of a domain-based economic structure. Do you really think I'm going to give up so close to the goal and leave the field to these scoundrels without a fight? So that they can then revive their sick system?«*

*»Well, then let's go!« Kevin calls out loud. »In an hour, a large rally will begin on the cathedral square. Let's show these Berlin big shots who's in charge here!«*

## **Departure**

For Gianna, the newspaper report about the accident, which was allegedly her fault, was just another cruel proof of the unscrupulousness of some gentlemen at the newspaper and in the Vatican. For David, however, a world collapsed. His boss - on the return flight with the airplane crashed. He himself - allegedly had been on board and had also lost his life. Whoever might have thought up this false report: He must have done this with full intention and ice-cold calculation. How else could the other article have been understood, in which David was defamed as a felon under a false name and put on the wanted list? He was dead. Officially - and unofficially just as well. With the amount of money that was put on his head, he was already de facto dead.

*»Now tell us!« Gianna says. »What did you do here in Rome to make yourself so unpopular?«*

*»Nothing at all!« David replies. »I was here on a three-day business trip. We met with some people from the Vatican. A few harmless meetings, a dinner together, and that's it! I have no idea what's going on here!«*

*But Gianna follows up: »Well, something must have happened! You don't believe that this is all a coincidence! Did you steal the bones of St. Peter or what have you done?«*

*David hesitates and then says: »I have a vague idea what this might be related to. During one of the meetings, I had a brief opportunity to hack into the Vatican Bank's database server. I noticed something that had to do with a mysterious death in Vienna. I came across a whole lot of strange money transfers. But nobody noticed - that is, of course - probably nobody noticed. Theoretically, of course, it could be that someone found out about it.«*



*»My dear David!« sighs Gianna. »If there's one thing the gentlemen at the Vatican can't stand, it's being caught in the act of any black-money dealings. Guess why I'm passing the time here in this ruined hotel!«*

In concise words, Gianna tells David an outline of her story. When she has finished, David reports in detail about the things that have happened so far in Vienna and Rome from his point of view. Together they come to the conclusion that David must have come across an explosive lead in this database server. So explosive that someone in the Vatican wants to prevent this information from finding its way to Vienna at all costs. After David had escaped the bomb attack on the airplane by chance, now obviously all levers are set in motion to get hold of him after all.

Marco and Mohammad have listened helplessly to the German conversation so far. After Gianna has translated the most important thing for them, all three agree: David must get out of the city as quickly as possible if he wants to live. His picture has not yet been widely circulated. But by tomorrow at the latest, when many people have read the newspaper, he will no longer be able to take a step on the street without being struck down by a bounty hunter. When Gianna and Mohammad together try to make this clear to David, Marco suddenly says.

*»Gianna, I'm sorry to have to say this: But this problem has not only David! You are also wanted by name and picture and should not be seen on the street from tomorrow morning. And what's even worse: We can't guarantee your safety here in the hotel anymore. For some of the guys here I would put my hand in fire. But there are also a few characters running around here who would deliver their grandmother for a few lire. You have to get out of here, and you have to get out now!«*

*»But my pass isn't even ready yet!« Gianna tries to talk her way out of it. »We still have to go to your acquaintance first to add the photo!«*

*»We'll do that tonight. We're going to see him right now!« Marco answers firmly.*

*»And what is to become of David?« Mohammad interjects.*

*»Good question!« Marco replies. »Gianna, can't David take Salvatore's pass? As long as there's no picture printed on it, it's a blank pass, right?«*

Gianna hesitates. She has only known this David Jonas for a few hours. Who knows what he's really done and whether the story he's telling them is really true. In the end, he really is an escaped child murderer and has only made it all up to save his battered head. Gianna looks deep into his eyes. No - this poor guy is not capable of making up such a robbery story.

*»Maybe you're right. Salvatore can't do anything with the ticket anymore. It's probably best that we escape together. David, do you come with me?«*

*»Where exactly are you going?«*

*»Our passes say we're coming from Milan. That means we can probably move freely north.«*

*»Milan would be great! That's the capital of the Po domain. There are regular flights from there to Vienna!«*

*»I don't know much about your world,« Gianna begins. »But you do realize that you can't just hop on the next plane in Milan out of the blue?«*

*»Why not? I go to the Danube Domain Consulate in Milan, report my ID and credit card stolen, get my replacement documents and off I go to Vienna. No offense intended: Milan is in one of the most advanced domains in the world. You can't compare it to this pathetic Rome here!«*

Gianna wrinkles her nose and replies in a huff: *»The gracious gentleman unfortunately forgets that from now on his name is Signore Cesare Botazzi and that he is a gardener by profession. By the time you get to Milan, David Jonas will be long dead and forgotten. Have fun at your consulate, is all I'm saying!«*

After a moment's consideration, David apologizes to Gianna for his arrogant and thoughtless words. She is right, of course. In the next few days, he will certainly be declared dead in his home country. David doesn't even want to imagine what his family will go through in the near future.

*»Guys!« Marco says, pointing to his wristwatch. »We don't have much time. Before we take care of the passes, we need to do a little work on your appearance. I'm going to see if Matteo is here yet.«*

He leaves the three of them somewhat perplexed in the room. After a minute, he returns with one of his roommates and briefly introduces him:

*»Gianna, David, this is Matteo. He works as an assistant at a hairdresser and will give you a suitable haircut. I would say bald for David and a chic short hairstyle for you, Gianna.«*

*»Are you crazy?« she replies indignantly. »I'm not going to let that guy cut off my beautiful hair!«*

David is also anything but enthusiastic. He had never liked this balding trend. On the contrary, he was always proud of his thick dark hair.

*»Don't be like that! Once your hair comes off, it won't be easy to recognize you from the newspaper photos. You should also blend in with the pilgrims who regularly leave the city. You have to look halfway authentic. And it's practical, too. So let's go! Down with the fur!«*

David is the first to admit defeat. He carefully removes his head bandage. Matteo begins to remove David's hair tuft by tuft with a mechanical hair clipper. When he has only a few stubble left, he spreads a handful of gel on the sparse remains. He leaves the foam to work for a while - and he's ready to move on. With a wet razor, he draws one path after the other across the top of David's skull. At the spot where the baseball bat has left its mark, he proceeds a little more carefully. After a few minutes, his work is complete and he asks David:

*»Do you want me to get you a mirror?«*

*»Thank you no!« David replies and removes the remaining foam from his head with the remains of his bandage.*

*»Next, please!«*

Gianna has meanwhile given up her resistance. Reluctantly, she allows Matteo to put a blanket over her shoulders and begin his work. He seems to understand something about it. At least no blood had been shed on David. With a pair of scissors he slowly but surely works his way through her thick curls. Snip - snip - snip. Gianna sheds a few small tears. She is not sure whether this is only due to the loss of her hair or the symbolic end of an entire period of her life. To Matteo's question about the mirror, she answers »Yes« with certainty.

*»My God!« she exclaims in horror. »I look like a boy!«*

*»Well, I think it's chic!« Marco replies. »And it's not for eternity.«*

David and Mohammad just grin stupidly to themselves as they look at the result. It will certainly take a long time before the original state is restored!

*»But now we finally have to get going!« Marco reminds them with another glance at the clock. »My acquaintance has a small bookstore in Via dei Condotti, very close to the Spanish Steps - number 10. He lives directly above the store. I hope he's home. You Gianna best go there with David on the Vespa. I'll join you on the bike in about 10 minutes. Take everything you need with you. You probably won't come back here to the hotel.«*

Together they go downstairs through the stairwell to the dilapidated lobby, where Gianna's motor scooter has found its new parking space. Marco fetches an old rickety bicycle from the basement. He roughly explains the direction to Gianna and then whizzes off to get a little head start.

David is wide-eyed when he sees Gianna start the Vespa with the kick starter.

*»This is exactly the model we have in Vienna. But with an electric motor! I didn't even know that they used to be available as*

*gasoline-powered models. These stinkers haven't been allowed to drive in the city center for a long time.«*

*»You can walk if you prefer,« Gianna replies, annoyed.*

Then she waits until David has taken a seat on the pillion and roars out through the open hotel entrance. The ride to Via dei Condotti doesn't take long. Gianna knows this area well. She loves the many small shops and the artisan stores in the former boutique district. As they pass, she shows David the Spanish Steps. Long ago, this was supposedly the location of the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See. The square in front of the embassy was Spanish territory, and any foreigner who stayed there without permission could be required to serve in the Spanish army. A right of asylum against the Vatican could also be granted here. »Oh, if only that would still be possible today,« Gianna secretly thinks.

It doesn't take two minutes before Marco comes whizzing along on his bike.

*»Get in here!« he says to Gianna and David as he pushes his bike into a courtyard driveway.*

Gianna pushes the scooter behind and bucks it up in the small courtyard. Marco goes to a house entrance and presses a bell button. Somewhere in the house a bell rings and someone calls »Subito«. After a while, a gray-haired man opens the door and looks in surprise at who is bothering him at this hour. When he recognizes Marco, his expression brightens.

*»Buonasera Marco! I was expecting you and your friends earlier. Come on in! We're about to go to my store.«*

The three follow him into the house and enter the dark bookstore through the back door. The bookseller leads them into a back room and switches on the light.

*»Enrico, this is Gianna and David.«*

*Enrico pauses a little. »Didn't you mention a Salvatore?«*

*»Events have unfortunately come to a head since yesterday. Salvatore is dead. Shot by a killer of the Vatican. The young man here will leave town with Gianna instead. Believe me, he's in just as deep shit as poor Salvatore. And we can trust him. I'll vouch for him.«*

The bookseller seems a bit suspicious. Obviously, he does not appreciate such changes of plans very much. He turns to Gianna in displeasure:

*»Where do you guys have the passes?«*

Gianna hands him the two documents and the sample copy to use as a template and says.

*»Here on these bills must still photos of us on it. And then the stamp of the Vatican State must be added. Do you think you can do that?«*

The old man just looks at her disdainfully. Then he hangs a white sheet in front of the bookshelf on the wall, turns on two bright spotlights and asks Gianna to take a seat in front of the sheet. Then he takes a small digital camera out of a drawer, turns it on and says:

*»Please be friendly, but not too friendly!«*

He repeats the same procedure with David. Then he disappears briefly into a small closet at the end of the room and returns after a while with two small printed ID photos.

*»Well, hit it well enough?«*

Gianna and David hardly recognize each other in the pictures, but this is not due to the quality of the shots, but to their still unfamiliar hairstyles. The bookseller cuts the photos to size and then gets a kind of stapler out of the cupboard. With two firm pushes on each of the apparatus's long levers, he attaches the photos to the pass with two brass-colored ring eyelets. All that's missing now is the seal. Gianna is curious to see how he is going to manage this. Enrico opens the drawer again. He puts the camera back and takes out two small boxes instead. When he opens one of them, it turns out

to be a normal ink pad. In the other box, there are just a few coins lying around.

*»Who among you can still remember this coin?« he asks amusedly to the group as he holds a coin, silver on the outside and gold on the inside, in front of them. »This is a two-euro Vatican coin from the year 2005 with the coat of arms of the cardinal chamberlain on the reverse."*

He carefully presses the back of the coin onto the ink pad and then presses it onto the lower right corner of Gianna's photo on the pass. After about ten seconds, he carefully lifts it off the document again and waves the pass around a bit to speed up the drying process.

*"Voilà, it doesn't look bad at all! " he praises himself as he compares the finished document with the sample copy.*

Gianna and David's mouths remain open. This stamp impression really hardly differs from the original. Maybe a little more smeared, but not so much that anyone would doubt the authenticity of the document. Then, with a deft hand, Enrico repeats the same procedure with David's passport.

*»Well, my beauties, there you have it! What are you going to do now?«*

*Gianna answers uncertainly: »Well, we're going to pretend to be pilgrims now and head north out of town.«*

*»Now?« Enrico asks, horrified. »And where do you have your belongings?«*

Gianna sheepishly points to her small backpack and David just shrugs. He owns nothing more than the clothes he wears on his body.

*»You are two beautiful pilgrims!« Enrico says shaking his head.  
»Come upstairs to my apartment!«*

They leave his bookstore on the ground floor and go up a narrow staircase. Once there, Enrico leads them into his living room, where a woman - apparently his wife - is sitting at the living room table. She is reading a

book and seems to be quite absorbed in it. Astonished, she looks over the top of her reading glasses when she sees the strangers enter.

*»Ariana, this is my friend Marco and his companions I told you about. Just think, these two are still planning to mingle with the pilgrims tonight and leave the city. This young lady's little backpack is all they have with them!«*

*»You can't be serious,« Enrico's wife says pityingly. »You will not leave until dawn and, if you wish, you can spend the night here with us. But before that, we'll outfit you for your venture!«*

Gianna and David look at each other, perplexed. Then Enrico begins to explain:

*»My wife has a small store right next to the bookstore. She sells mainly pilgrim supplies there. You have no idea how many people today make the pilgrimage on foot to Rome via the old Via Francigena. Before they head back, many of them re-equip themselves. Ariana makes much more sales with her pilgrim supplies than I do with my books!«*

*»Well, don't exaggerate, my dear! But basically Enrico is right. The need for pilgrimage equipment has grown in recent years. Some completely re-equip themselves before they set out on foot on the arduous return journey.«*

*Gianna cautiously asks, »And now you recommend that we purchase two complete sets of pilgrim's outfits from you?«*

*Ariana replies, startled, »No, no, for God's sake! I don't want to do business with you! It is only so that the pilgrims, if they equip themselves anew, leave mostly immediately their old stuff here with us. Most of the things are no longer usable and are immediately thrown away by us. But sometimes there are also things that can still be used. You can help yourselves from this fund if you want to. If you don't want to stand out, I would recommend old and torn clothes anyway.«*

Now Marco, who had remained silent until now, joins in the conversation.



*»You can trust Enrico and Ariana! They once had a bad experience with the Vatican people themselves and are happy to help anyone who has problems with this institution.«*

*Enrico adds, »Also, I still owe you a favor Marco, because of my motorcycle that you fixed for me again last month.«*

Gianna and David then have no more reservations. On the contrary, they thank Enrico for his generous offer and get ready for the evening shopping trip. All together they go to the store of Enrico's wife and let this expert pack two old hiking backpacks, which contain everything a pilgrim's heart desires: sleeping bag, sleeping mat, outdoor jacket, water bottle, pocket knife, eating utensils, detergent, change of clothes, underwear, first aid kit, blister plaster, maps and so on and so forth. After Enrico has looked a few times at the glowing bump on David's shaved head, he goes to a shelf and pulls out two souvenir caps with "Roma" written on them.

*»Here - these will protect you from the sun!« And then, looking at David's fine leather shoes, »You won't get far in those, my boy. I'll bring you some of our AdiDAS shoes. What size do you wear?«*

*»43,« David replies in amazement. »I wouldn't have thought there was anything like that here in Rome. In Vienna, they've recently come back into fashion. The Adidas company was almost completely lost in the great economic crisis. In the meantime, however, it is back in big business and supplies almost the whole world with its expensive sports articles from its subsidiary domain Aurach.Regnitz.Main.Rhine!«*

Enrico and Ariana just shake their heads uncomprehendingly at the nonsense the young man is talking. Ariana disappears into the lumber-room and comes back after a while with a pair of completely scuffed and worn, but at least newly soled, hiking boots.

*»Here - a pair of AdiDAS shoes - size 43. A cobbler from the neighborhood repairs them for me. Here on the side he even burned his logo into the leather: ∑AdiDAS - Assemblato di Daoud Al-Sayed.«*

## Swan song

*There roars a call like a thunderclap,  
like clashing swords and splashing waves:  
To the Rhine, the Rhine, to the Father Rhine!  
who wants to be the guardian of the river?  
Dear fatherland, put your mind at rest,  
Firm and true stands the Watch, the Watch on the Rhine!*

Never before in the history of the city had so many people gathered in the squares around Cologne Cathedral. And never before had so many people sung the new anthem of the Rhine domain so loudly and with such fervor. And if there was no singing, then slogans were chanted such as: »We are the people!« or »Berlin go home!«

The broadcasting station of New Rhenish Wave was literally besieged by an army of angry people. The putschists used loudspeakers, radio and television to try to persuade the demonstrators to leave the square. The only effect they had was the opposite. With every threat issued, even more people streamed into the center of Cologne and demonstratively opposed the putschists.

A speaker's stage was erected in front of the cathedral's main entrance. The many loudspeakers of the amplification system were placed at a dizzying height, amidst the dark sandstone facade, around the nave of the cathedral. Even on the other side of the Rhine, the militant words of the speakers could still be heard.

The city council members, who had temporarily gone underground, fearlessly stepped up to the podium and appealed to the coup plotters to stop using violence and surrender. Although the stage could easily have been fired upon from within the occupied broadcasting building, one speaker after another stepped up to the microphone. It was clear to the putschists that if they had used firearms, the people's rage would have been unmanageable.

For three days, the putschists held themselves entrenched in their building. When they realized that neither words nor violence stood a chance, they agreed to enter into negotiations. Eventually, they were guaranteed

impunity and a free departure. Two transport helicopters of the city administration picked them up from the roof terrace of the broadcasting building on the evening of the fourth day and took them to a safe place of their choice.

Similar scenes played out in the other cities of the former Federal Republic of Germany. In Frankfurt, the Broadcasting House Dornbusch was cleared by the putschists only after a week-long siege. In Munich, the high-rise building of the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation at the main train station was forcibly retaken by the residents. The worst scenes, however, took place in Berlin, around the Reichstag. In the former government district, the former broadcasting headquarters of ARD and ZDF went up in flames. None of the putschists there could escape the flaming hell. An unleashed lynch mob raged for days in the streets of downtown Berlin. No one who had once held political office could be sure of his life in that city. Two former ministers of the last federal government were found slain between the pillars of the Brandenburg Gate.

With the failure of the attempted coup, the old Federal Republic of Germany had de facto ceased to exist. Almost all former German citizens found themselves, both economically and politically, in one of the following six domains: Rhine, Danube, Elbe, Ems, Weser and Oder. The domain system had not been explicitly desired by the German population. However, it seemed to the majority at that time to have no alternative. A return to the failed form of government was no longer a serious alternative for anyone.

The domain assignment of the people seemed simple, plausible and comprehensible. Only in some coastal regions on the North and Baltic Seas, were there stretches of land that were outside the six major river systems due to their geographical location. However, most of the affected cities were soon integrated into the nearest domain as special economic zones.

Official domain capitals did not exist at that time. Each city and village within a domain was politically autonomous and could establish multilateral relations with other units as it wished. There were domains in which a main metropolis quickly emerged. In the Rhine domain this was the city of Cologne. Elsewhere, cities continued to compete with each other for supremacy for a long time. In the Danube domain, the former Bavarian capital Munich did not want to accept the leadership claims of the various Danube metropolises. In the Elbe domain, Hamburg, with its important port, had from the outset laid claim to capital status. But since Berlin is also located in the Elbe river system, the dispute was pre-programmed here, in the course of which other major cities such as Prague and Dresden also spoke out.

By far the most problematic, however, was the situation of former German citizens in the Oder domain. The Oder-Neisse line, which had formerly separated the two nation states of Germany and Poland, had moved to the center of the domain. For many towns in the upper reaches of the Oder and on the Lusatian Neisse, this was undoubtedly a blessing, as the border, artificially created after World War II, finally disappeared from the map. However, the German-speaking inhabitants were only a small minority in the Oder domain compared to the Polish-speaking majority. The competition for capital status was between the cities of Szczecin and Wrocław. Many of the former Germans felt left behind and suffered from the sometimes xenophobic behavior of their Polish neighbors. Once again in history, the relationship between Germans and Poles was put to the test here.

## **Via Cassia**

The sun has not yet risen when David and Gianna are already heading north, crossing the Tiber on the Milvian Bridge. At the first dawn they had said goodbye to their hosts. Ariana hadn't missed the chance to pack them both a proper snack. Eggs, cheese, bacon, a salami and a whole loaf of homemade bread. The two would not starve so quickly in any case.

*»Look Gianna!« shouts David when he sees the many padlocks on the bridge. »Now this mischief has already spread to you in Rome!«*

*»You've got to be kidding!« Gianna replies shaking her head at so much ignorance. »From this bridge, this romantic custom has conquered the whole world! When my parents were newly in love, they also put a lock here and threw the key into the Tiber. The lock must have been removed long ago. But I'm sure the key is still lying somewhere down there in the stinking broth.«*

*»You mean your parents helped start this tacky fuss?«*

*»No. When my parents chained their love here, bridge locks were already common. When this custom arose, I don't know. It must have been much earlier. At any rate, here on this old Roman bridge is where it is thought to have originated.«*

Gianna fails to mention that the Romans have long been at loggerheads with the Florentines over who really invented these love locks. The Viennese and all the other northern Europeans stole the idea; that much is certain.

After a few kilometers, David and Gianna reach the Via Cassia and follow this time-honored Roman road out of town. There is not much going on at this time of day. Every now and then, a farmer passes them with his cart. Probably they want to sell their goods at one of the many markets in the city. Otherwise, there is still paradisiacal peace here. Only the chirping of the birds in the trees and the crowing of the roosters can be heard. To go on pilgrimage on foot - that's quite something.

With every step they take, they leave Rome and the bad memories behind. Each step brings them forward, towards a new life. What will this life look like? Who can know? Do you always have to know what the next day will bring? Until now, they always pretty much knew what the next day was going to be like. Did it do them any good? Were they freer than they are now? Weren't they trapped in their daily routine and in their lives? Now they are free. Free as a bird. They have no concrete destination, only an

approximate direction. North. Everything else will be found. Are they outlaws? They have no protection, no roof over their heads. They have only one direction. Always to where the sun never stands. That is where the path leads them. Is the way really the goal?

After four hours they reach La Storta. Already in the Middle Ages, pilgrims following the Via Francigena - the so-called Franconian Way - passed through here. The name of the town derives from the ancient Roman road, which had a prominent bend here. La Storta is also where today's Roman urban area ends. Gianna and David are startled when they suddenly see a roadblock with a turnpike in front of them. Now it is time to keep calm and not to be afraid or suspicious. The policeman on duty, however, hardly takes any notice of the two pilgrims, but only wishes them a friendly »Good journey« and then devotes himself to reading his newspaper again.

*»How far do you think we'll get today?« asks David, when they've already passed the checkpoint by a good distance.*

*»I don't know,« Gianna answers uncertainly. »Enrico's hiking map mentions the small town of Campagnano. There seem to be a lot of pilgrim hostels there.«*

*»Do you think it's a good idea to stay at one of those pilgrim hostels? Maybe they'll be looking for us there?«*

*»Hmmm, you're probably right. While we're still in the Rome area, maybe we'd better avoid the main roads and the hostels.«*

*»Do you know your way around these parts?«*

*»Last year I was with friends for the weekend at Lago di Bracciano. It was very nice there. We camped and bathed a lot. Actually, we have everything with us to spend the night there. It can't be very far from here. We have to turn left at some point.«*

*»Good idea! A refreshing swim in the lake would be right up my alley. Slowly, the soles of my feet are already smoking!«*

*»Already?« Gianna asks, horrified. »We've barely left the Roman city limits and your feet are already hurting?«*

*»No no, it's not that bad! I'm just looking forward to taking a bath. That's all!«*

They walk wordlessly next to each other for a while - each absorbed in his own thoughts. Gianna is the first to break the silence this time and asks:

*»Tell me. Is it true that your ancestors here have also been on the run?«*

*»What do you mean? My father and my grandparents are originally from Syria and fled to Germany via Italy. I can't tell you exactly where they came through. They were crammed into a van like animals and didn't notice the route. They probably took the shortest route on the highway.«*

*»Then they probably took the Autostrada along the Adriatic coast. That was certainly the fastest way. Theoretically, however, they could also have come through here at that time. There used to be an alternative route from Rome to Bologna via Florence. But that has not been passable for a long time.«*

In fact, most of the bridge and tunnel structures on this route have now become impassable. There is simply no one left to maintain the complicated road layout of the old "Autostrada del Sole" through the Apennines. Now the gigantic viaducts have either already collapsed or are in acute danger of collapsing, and very few people still dare to enter the endlessly long, dark tunnels.

*»Why do you have a different surname than your cousin?«  
Gianna wants to know. »Your fathers were brothers, after all.«*

*»That was the decision of my father. When my family left Syria, my father was still a child. The escape must have traumatized him quite a bit. When he finally arrived in Germany, he had to fight for a place in German society as a teenager. That was very difficult for him. Refugees like him were expected to integrate into German society as smoothly as possible. Shortly after I was born,*

*he applied for a name change for our family. He probably wanted to prove his willingness to integrate by taking this step. He also once told me how he came up with the name Jonas. In the Koran, there is a story about the Prophet Yūnus, who was eaten by a whale at sea and later spat out somewhere in a foreign land. When my father heard that the same prophet was known in Germany as Jonas and that this name was on the list of names for refugees seeking naturalization, his choice was made. From then on, we were called Jonas.«*

*»That's interesting,« Gianna says. »My father also took his name off. He comes from Germany and used to be called Müller. When he married my mother, he took her name and was henceforth called Marconi. Actually, in those days it was rather unusual for men to take their wife's name. But when I imagine myself growing up in Rome as Gianna Müller - impossible!«*

As David and Gianna slowly but steadily approach Lago di Bracciano, they gradually exchange the life stories of their families. And what a lot there is to tell! They had grown up in well-ordered family relationships - albeit in two different worlds. Their parents had experienced exciting times and never spared themselves with stories about them. It is a strange feeling when you suddenly remember these old stories and tell them again, as if you had experienced it all yourself. You change your perspective. You start talking differently and feeling differently. You feel somehow - old.

When at noon the sun burns mercilessly from the sky, they leave the path and take a rest in the shade of a large pine tree. Why torture themselves unnecessarily? They have all the time in the world. No one is waiting for them. There is no schedule or calendar in their lives anymore. They eat and drink and sleep a little. Only when the midday heat is over and a light wind comes up from the west, they continue their march through the rolling countryside in the foothills of the Sabatin Mountains.

In the afternoon they reach the first houses of Anguillara. The population of the town had grown strongly after the economic crisis, when many inhabitants of Rome - driven by hunger - had sought their fortune in the



rural provinces. Many agricultural towns in the former region of Lazio, which had suffered for decades from the massive rural exodus, suddenly became havens for hungry city dwellers.

The locality seems to stretch on endlessly, until suddenly and unexpectedly they see the lake in front of them. Circular and deep blue. Framed on the horizon by forested mountains.

*»Once there was a volcano at this site,« Gianna explains. »The magma chamber collapsed at some point and today forms the lake. Isn't it a beautiful sight!«*

Indeed. David is also completely overwhelmed when he is now rewarded with this magnificent view after the strain of the long march.

*»Yes, here I could grow old and retire!«*

*»Dream on!« replies Gianna. »I suggest we find a nice spot on the west shore for the night.«*

They leave Anguillara behind and walk along the narrow shore road. To the right of the road, one farmstead follows the next. The further they get, the more sparsely populated the area becomes. Finally, they find a beautiful place right on the shore of the lake. The road is far enough away that they can't be seen from there. An old dilapidated hut offers them shelter for the night. It is warped, without windows or doors. But it has a roof that could protect them from rain. »Rain - is there even such a thing here?« wonders David. It hasn't rained once since he arrived in Rome. Do they even know such a thing here?

In front of the hut there is a small fireplace framed with stones. Next to it is a tree trunk that serves as a seat. They are obviously not the first who have discovered this idyllic place for themselves.

*»Do you think Ariana packed us bathing suits in our pilgrim backpacks?« David asks.*

*»Hardly! I don't think she assumed we were going on a beach vacation! We have towels. What more do you need? I'm going in*

*the water now. And don't you dare look! Because I can't stand peeping toms!«*

Gianna searches for her towel in the depths of her backpack. When she finally finds it, she lays it over the trunk and slips out of her clothes in a flash. Then she runs as fast as she can across the short black gravel beach and plunges into the waters. David doesn't take long and does the same. As he walks his bare feet over the small black lava stones heated by the sun, he realizes that Gianna had not been driven by pure shame. It is as if he were walking over red-hot coals. He quickens his steps until his feet finally reach the cooling water.

*»Come on in!« Gianna calls out to him with a laugh as he hesitantly takes one step in front of the other.*

David does as he is told. Gianna has said that she doesn't like peeping toms, but this doesn't seem to have any effect on her own behavior. David is visibly relieved when the water finally reaches his belly button. Once again, he briefly dips his arms in. Then he also jumps headfirst into the lake and swims with strong arm movements into the deep water.

*»Where did you learn to swim?« Gianna wants to know.*

*»What a stupid question! In my childhood. In school and from my parents. Everybody can swim!«*

*»In Rome, very few people know how to swim. My dad taught me when I was a little girl. We used to go to Ostia to the sea a lot. That's where he taught me how to swim. None of my school friends in Trastevere learned to swim. The sea is quite far away and there are no swimming pools in Rome.«*

*»Can't you learn to swim in the Tiber? In Vienna, we have plenty of beautiful swimming opportunities on the Old and New Danube.«*

*»In the Tiber? Are you insane? No man has ever survived a bath in that cesspool!«*

*»Why did your father want you to learn how to swim?« David wants to know.*

*»For him, it's the most natural thing in the world that everyone can swim. He also learned it in Germany as a small child and probably wanted to pass that on to me. I can dive too!«*

To lend credibility to her statement, Gianna takes a deep breath and disappears under water for half a minute. David is already starting to worry, when she reappears right next to him, snorting. In her hand she holds a large stone.

*»Here! I brought it up from the bottom. I guess the water is four meters deep here!«*

Laughing, she throws the stone in David's direction, causing a small fountain of water to splash into his face.

*»I can do that too!« he shouts and also disappears into the depths of the lake.*

This goes on for quite a while. Like two exuberant young seals, the two of them dive and swim around each other. Gianna makes fun of David's sunburned bald head, which sticks out of the water like a red buoy. David has his fun every time Gianna dives, when he briefly sees her white buttocks emerge from the water like two icebergs as she descends.

After a good half hour in the lake, they start to get cold. When they are dry and dressed again, their stomachs kick in. With great hunger, they make themselves over the provisions that the good Ariana has so lovingly packed for them.

*»Do you think we can fill up our water bottles here in the lake?« David asks as he takes the last sip from his bottle.*

*»Of course. The city of Rome and the Vatican have been getting their drinking water from this lake by pipeline for ages. That means: First the Vatican takes what it needs for its gardens and fountains. And what remains, the inhabitants of the city get. Most of the time, there is enough water for everyone. However, there*

*have been hot summers when the lake dried up so much due to the water withdrawal that drinking water had to be rationed in Rome. But that the Vatican has saved water, I have never experienced in all these years.«*

Here, however, Gianna did not pay proper attention in history class. Many years ago, there was actually once a pope who, during a drought, allowed the Vatican gardens to go dry and prioritized people's right to clean drinking water. Those days are long gone, however, and the pope of that time, whatever his name, has long been dead and forgotten. However, this symbolic act had not been of much use to the Romans at the time anyway. Like many other cities in the world, they had put their water supply in the hands of a private company. With the result that, due to mismanagement and poor organization, the water in the city nevertheless had to be strictly rationed. Until the Pope's prayers were answered and the longed-for rain finally fell.

## **Currency reform**

Jan Eckert has now completed his bachelor's degree in business administration. His next goal is to earn a master's degree in economics. He has given up his social services job with the city. Instead, he now works as a student trainee in a Cologne company. Recording, posting and archiving invoices, dunning, reconciling accounts and creating payment runs. These are essentially the tasks in which he supports the company's accounting department, sixteen hours a week. Not that he didn't enjoy working with the old folks anymore. But he felt that his bread-and-butter job should have something more to do with his study goal.

One evening his phone rings and it's his mother. She seems to be quite distraught.

*»Jan, have you heard the news? Now they want to take away our house! They can't do that! Where are Anna and I supposed to live in the future?«*

*»Hi mom, calm down please. Who wants to take your house?«*

*»Well, this domain government! On the news, they said that as part of the coming currency reform, such a property equalization law will also be passed. All real estate will be subject to a forced mortgage. That is an expropriation! From what am I supposed to pay the mortgage interest? If I can't service the mortgage, I'll have to sell the house! Or they'll just throw us out on the street and take the house away from me! Oh Jan, what am I supposed to do?«*

In recent years, almost all the municipalities in the Rhine domain have joined forces to form a large common economic alliance. Trade between the cities is flourishing. The biggest obstacle to trade, however, is the many local currencies. Each region has its own money, and each cross-regional transaction requires time-consuming conversions and money exchanges. All inhabitants of the Rhine domain were therefore happy when there were finally first signs of the introduction of a single domain currency. At the beginning of next month, the time has come: the Rhine Mark will replace all previous means of payment.

*»Mom, don't get so upset! It won't be that bad. The fact that they are pushing through the Property Equalization Act at the same time as the currency reform is unexpected, but basically this is a sensible and fair thing to do.«*

*»What's fair about that?« asks Jan's mother indignantly. »Your father and I have worked all our lives for this house. And now, just like that, it's being taken away from us again!«*

*»Mom, they're not taking away your house! Don't drive yourself crazy! Since it's an owner-occupied property, the mortgage will be very small. And the period in which you can pay off the mortgage is probably 30 years. I can calculate for you when I get a chance, what that means for an additional monthly burden. But it will not be the world!«*

*»But why do they do that? It's not fair!«*

*»No, after all, this law is about justice. During the crisis, almost everyone lost all their assets. All savings, life insurance policies,*

home savings contracts and stock portfolios became worthless. Only a few smart people who put their money into tangible assets in time got off lightly. This law is now to ensure that those of their possessions give up something, so that the others do not have to starve.«

»But why homebuilders of all people? There are other tangible assets, too. Why doesn't anyone go for them?« Elvira Eckert wants to know.

»Well, that's not true! There has been a strict ban on precious metal trading for some time now. Anyone who has hoarded gold and silver is now legally obliged to sell it to the domain at a very poor price. Those who have invested in art, vintage cars or other collector's items are pinched anyway, because nobody needs that stuff and there is no market for it anymore. The only things worth anything at the moment are houses and apartments. And you know exactly who owns what from the land register entries.«

»It's people's own fault if they carried all their money to the savings bank back then instead of investing in their own property!«

»The money should only benefit those who are no longer able to make ends meet. Who are old or ill or for other reasons can no longer provide for their livelihood. We cannot let these people starve nevertheless! We have only the choice to support these people either from taxes or over this fortune reconciliation. If we make it over the tax, however, that is more unfairly, than if one takes the real estate owners over this special tax into the responsibility.«

»That's your opinion! I don't think that's fair at all!« exclaims Jan's mother. »And your sister sees it the same way I do!«

»Get over it! You can't change it anyway. In any case, you don't have to be afraid that you won't be able to keep the house. You both have a regular income. By the way, there was a law like this before. After the Second World War. At that time, too, real estate was mortgaged to enable the bombed-out and homeless refugees

*to survive. The people back then were much worse off than we are today. We only lost our money. They lost their houses, farms, homes and relatives. We are doing comparatively well!«*

*»If you say so. I see it a little differently. By the way, when are you going to come home again?«*

*»I have a lot to do at the moment for university and work. But maybe the weekend after next it will work out.«*

*»Anyway, we would be happy! In the meantime, take care and don't work too much! Do you hear me?«*

*»Yes mom. Say hello to Anna from me! Bye.«*

Jan ends the phone call and ponders a bit more. Actually, his mother could be glad that she was able to stay in the large family home after his father's death. After all, it hadn't been paid off yet. If things had gone badly, the bank would have put the house up for auction. But the bank was bankrupt and there was no legal successor who could have disputed the house. Actually, his family could not complain. The forfeited residual debt for the house was certainly higher than the forced mortgage, which is now probably due.

Other property owners have completely different problems. The landlord of her shared apartment, for example. Since he does not use his property himself, he now has to reckon with a much higher forced mortgage. In addition, there are the many renovation works that had not been done in the last years and that are now more and more urgent. Actually, the landlord had acquired the rental house at that time as a retirement provision. Now he is forced to sell the house because of the need for renovation and the forced mortgage. And this at a time when no reasonable price can be achieved for it. For him this means: house gone and pension provision gone. He himself lives with his family for rent and is too old to work. Jan almost feels sorry for the good man. But then he remembers how arrogant and mean he used to be to his tenants, and the pity gives way

to a good dose of spitefulness. That's just the way it is in life: There are winners and losers.

## **Anguillara**

David lies awake for a long time. He had just been talking to Gianna for a good hour. Now she has turned over and fallen asleep. The only sound to be heard from her sleeping bag is soft, regular breathing. David is lost in thought, admiring the starry sky above him. In his entire life, he has never seen so many stars. Constellations he has only known from books are suddenly clear and huge above him. Orion and the Big Dipper literally jump into his eye. What a difference to the night sky in Vienna! Of course, the stars can be seen there too on clear nights. But never as bright and spectacular as here on the shore of this crater lake. Is that due to the more southerly location? Or because of the absolute darkness that reigns here at night? David misses his smartphone to get an answer to this question.

The bright point near the Big Dipper must be the North Star! It points the way home. What will be waiting for him there? Probably first of all a lot of disbelieving faces. »David Jonas is dead,« they will say. Tragically killed in an accident while performing his professional duties. »He couldn't be David Jonas,« they will say. And he will first have to prove them wrong - which should not be very difficult. With the help of his friends, colleagues, relatives, acquaintances, his dentist or various DNA matching procedures. In the end, everyone will believe that he is David Jonas and still alive. Although the Vatican State has officially confirmed his death. They just made a mistake. They will certainly formally apologize for this unforgivable error and express their joy over his happy return home. And then? What comes after that? Will he be safe in Vienna? Was his friend and colleague Klaus Baumann safe from these criminals in Vienna?

What will become of Gianna? She is a sweet girl and has obviously been through a lot lately. Most of all, she seems to be troubled by the death of Salvatore. David still can't make sense of her stories. How close was Gianna to this Salvatore? Was he just a colleague or her friend or even her



partner? In any case, she avoids talking about this relationship and he has to accept that. She seems to accept him as he is. Of course, he senses her skepticism, which she often blatantly expresses to him. Like a meteorite from a distant galaxy, David suddenly plunged into Gianna's life. From one day to the next, the two have been condemned to save their skins. One can't really live without the other and yet they are as different as two people can hardly be. How long will they be on the road together? Where does Gianna even want to go? David doubts that she knows that herself.

A shooting star flits across the sky. While David ponders which wish should be number one on his long list, he falls asleep. He sleeps like a log. When the first birds in the bushes greet the morning he wakes up again. He has rarely slept as well as he did that night. The grass floor under his sleeping mat was obviously more soothing for his back than the soft bed in the Hotel Villa Medici. What time will it be? Maybe half past five? Only a few scattered veil clouds can be seen in the light blue sky above him. Forerunners of another beautiful day under the southern sun. The morning air at the lake is still quite fresh, though. David ties the cord on the hood of his sleeping bag a little tighter and enjoys the cozy warmth that the down fur gives off to him. While his breath condenses in the fresh morning air. It's definitely too early to get up, he thinks to himself. And after a few minutes he is fast asleep again.

The sun has already risen when he is woken up by Gianna. She is already dressed. Her wet hair indicates that she has already taken a morning bath in the lake. David considers whether he should really leave the protective cover of his sleeping bag already. Why not just lie there? Lie still and enjoy this magnificent sight. On the opposite side of the lake, the Sabatin Mountains shine in the soft morning light. A duck family with five little chicks is just swimming past their campsite and takes no notice of the two strangers.

David asks Gianna what she thinks about spending another night in this idyllic place. To his surprise, she doesn't mind. Why should she be in a hurry either? If there's anything the two of them have in abundance, it's

time. After a quick washing in the lake, David takes a rough survey of the remaining food supplies in his backpack. Gianna suggests they head to Anguillara to run a few errands. After a breakfast of bread, sausage, eggs and cheese - but unfortunately no coffee - they pack up and head back to town. They haven't been on the shore road long when an old farmer overtakes them with his horse-drawn cart. Gianna calls out to him in Italian. The farmer mumbles some unintelligible reply and before David knows it, the two of them are sitting in the back of the cart, leisurely rocking towards their destination. Gianna talks loudly to the farmer for most of the ride, while David does the same to the horse and silently lets the landscape pass by.<sup>16</sup> The ride doesn't last very long, however, and when they reach the center of Anguillara, the two say goodbye to the helpful man.

They leave the old town on the right and head straight for the lakeside promenade. On the terrace of a small bar, directly on the lake, they take their backpacks off and take a seat. They are the only guests, but it is still quite early in the morning.

*»Due cappuccino per favore!« David shouts when the bar owner has spotted them.*

*»You speak Italian?« Gianna asks in astonishment.*

*»I memorized a few phrases before I left.«*

*»It's called cappuccini! Plural. You get it?«*

*»For my sake. But the waiter understood. You'll see!«*

Sure enough, after a while the bar owner brings the ordered coffee. He puts the two cups on the small table, looks at his two guests for a while and then tries to start a conversation with David. But he just shrugs his shoulders helplessly in the face of this incomprehensible torrent of words that suddenly bursts upon him. Seeking help, he turns his gaze to Gianna, who seems to enjoy the spectacle for a while and then finally relieves him

of the embarrassing situation. After a few explanatory sentences on her part, the barista spontaneously laughs and then disappears back into his bar, amused.

*»What did you tell him?« David wants to know.*

*»That we are on pilgrimage to Rome on foot, and that you come from the northern domains beyond the Alps.«*

*»That was all?«*

*»And that you hardly know any Italian so far except Prego, Per favore and Grazie.«*

*»Nothing else?«*

*»And that you will pray at the Holy Father in Rome for more wisdom to come upon you!«*

*»Very funny! And what were you talking about so animatedly with the old farmer?«*

*»The same thing, actually. That we are on pilgrimage to Rome on foot and that you are deaf and dumb and can't talk.«*

*»Very believable! You do remember that I loudly said Grazie Arrivederci to him?«*

*»Yeah, he looked pretty confused, too. I think we still need to work on our story!«*

*»Why do you always say we're headed for Rome?«*

*»On the shore road we went south. I can hardly claim that we are pilgrims and come from Rome. We would be going in the wrong direction! And I told the barista because it could be advantageous for us. If we are being pursued by the Vatican's henchmen, they are looking for someone who is on the run from Rome. As long as we appear to be making a pilgrimage toward Rome, we'll be less suspicious.«*

*»I guess you're right,« David agrees, »but why did you say I was deaf and dumb?«*

*»Because of your papers. If we ever get into an inspection and you show your papers, you'll have to pass as a gardener from the Po Domain! What will you do if someone asks you something? You can't very well say you don't speak Italian!«*

*»I may have taken a vow of silence! Not a single word must pass my lips during the entire pilgrimage,« David suggests.*

*"Good idea! Best start practicing already!«*

Gianna and David linger on the terrace for almost an entire hour. In the meantime, the barista has stretched out a few umbrellas and hopes for more guests. But the lakeside promenade still seems deserted. David thinks about how it might have looked here in the past, when tourists still flocked to this idyllic spot. Finally, Gianna goes into the bar and pays for the two cappuccini. Then they make their way into the old town, with its narrow, winding streets.

Outside the city walls, it had looked as if the town had been driven into the lake like a wedge. Once you have passed through the city gate, however, there is nothing left to see of the lake and the grandiose surroundings. Nothing but old and neglected houses. On a small square a market is taking place. Gianna wordlessly takes over and pulls David from stall to stall. He feels a bit transported back to his childhood, when his mother had dragged him shopping through the weekly market of the small Bavarian town. Gianna talks to the market women and buys a variety of things. Apples and grapes, potatoes, sausages, bread, a strange mass that looks like ready-prepared pizza dough. In the end, she even goes to the fishmonger and buys two splendid specimens of the shiny silver fish. David is surprised at Gianna's shopping frenzy, but lets her do it. She'll know how she wants to prepare all that stuff. If it had been up to him, they would have looked for a nice restaurant and had a good time. However, if

he remembers correctly, they hadn't passed a single restaurant on their wanderings so far.

When they have finished their stroll through the city, they set off again for their campsite by the lake. This time, however, they are not lucky enough to have someone give them a ride. They have to walk all the long way on the shore road, as they did yesterday. Compared to the distance they had covered yesterday coming from Rome, this is actually not worth mentioning. In the meantime, however, the sun is at its zenith, burning down mercilessly on the two hikers. »I hope the fish doesn't go bad!« thinks David. Gianna had the merchant wrap it in plenty of ice, but how long will it stay frozen at these temperatures?

Finally, they reach their dilapidated hut on the shore, all sweaty. Gianna carefully stows the food she has bought in the shade of the rotten roof. Then they both move on to the relaxing part of the day. Out of the clothes and into the cool water! »Life can be so beautiful« David thinks to himself as he tries to catch up with Gianna, who has already swum far out.

## **Localization**

On a gloomy Thursday morning, Jan Eckert is once again sitting tired on the streetcar. He has been working as a student trainee in the accounting department of Grasmann GmbH for two years now. The pay isn't bad, and Jan urgently needs money to pay the rent at the moment. Recently, Patrick and Elena left the WG - as newlyweds and parents of a sweet little girl. Patrick had finished his studies and found a job in a suburb of Cologne. Elena stopped working temporarily after the birth of little Isabella. So it was only a matter of time before Jan and Kevin would be left alone in the shared apartment. Now the two of them have to work hard to keep the big flat.

At first, Jan was quite bored with the job at Grasmann GmbH<sup>17</sup>. He had actually expected to be able to put his academic knowledge from his studies to practical use there. However, his day-to-day work mainly

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17 GmbH: Legal structure of a company with limited liability

consists of entering invoices into the company's ERP<sup>18</sup> system and chasing after employees who have not adhered to the existing ordering guidelines.

The Grasmann GmbH is one of the companies in the Cologne economic region that has made a fairytale rise to the top league of high-tech companies following the economic recovery. With their special pumps, they have found a niche in which they can turn the knowledge they have built up over decades into hefty profits. Their customers now include almost all the well-known oil production companies around the world. And the order intake curve knows only one direction: it points steeply upward.

After the streetcar ride, Jan walks another quarter of an hour through the unadorned industrial area in the north of Cologne before he reaches the administration building. The nice lady at the reception desk has known him for a long time and, as always, greets him in a friendly manner. Jan's workplace is on the second floor. Of course, he doesn't have his own office, but only a desk in the open-plan office where all his colleagues from the accounting department go about their work. To be precise, he doesn't even have his own desk, but shares it with another working student, with whom he therefore has to coordinate appointments.

*»Good morning, Mr. Müller!« he greets his colleague and direct superior as he takes a seat next to his desk neighbor.*

*»Oh, Mr. student is here again today! Good morning to you too!«*

Actually, all colleagues here are on first-name terms, and of course Jan and his colleague Matthias Müller are no exception. However, it is part of their regular banter that they occasionally raise their mutual salutations to a very formal level.

*»Anything special coming up today?« Jan wants to know.*

*»Nope, not that I know of. Your pile grew again a bit yesterday. Just see if there's anything important and get as much done as you can today!«*

Jan first gets a coffee from the vending machine. Then he logs in and reads the newly received e-mails. Then he begins to look through the papers in his inbox for news.

*»Has Jens from R&D finally brought the delivery bill for the IPC? I've been chasing him for two weeks now, but he just doesn't react! Meanwhile we have the second reminder of the supplier in the house but as long as I do not have the delivery bill, I can not release the transfer of the money!«*

*»Boy,« Mr. Müller replies, »don't get upset. Just go over to him and get the delivery bill. The people in the research department are under a lot of stress at the moment and set their priorities differently than we do.«*

*»Okay, I will,« Jan replies, »I know where the colleague has his desk.«*

*»Actually, you don't know how good you have it!«*

*»Why?« asks Jan in astonishment.*

*»It wasn't always the case here that you could solve your problems with a short walk across the hall!«*

Jan has to grin. Matthias Müller is certainly starting to tell his old stories again now. He is already close to retirement and has experienced the ups and downs of this company since his apprenticeship. It is even said that he still personally knew the old Grasmann, who founded the company back then and made it big.

*»I can still remember the days when you had to call India if you had problems with your computer. They had outsourced the entire IT back then. They also wanted to get rid of me when the accounting department was first moved to the Czech Republic and then to Poland. But they still needed people here to correct the mistakes of these cheap laborers and keep the store running.«*

*»Well,« says Jan. »A company just has to focus on its core competencies.«*

»That's what the fancy guys from the management consultancies used to say. You probably still learn it like that at university today. But may I tell you something? In practice, it works differently than you imagine in theory. When the old Grasmann sold the company, that was the beginning of the end. The new owners were only interested in quick profits and did not pursue any long-term strategy. The only thing that mattered to them were the quarterly figures and the share price.«

»Why was the company sold if everything was going so great before?«

»The old Grasmann was already over ninety years old and his descendants were not interested in continuing the company. It's not easy to learn how to run a store like this in a hurry. You have to have the right personality, otherwise it won't work. During that time, our company suffered the same fate as many other medium-sized family businesses. We were passed on from one company to the next and became a pawn in the Monopoly of the large multinationals. The worst was when the Americans took us over. Our colleagues in the USA soon realized that their products were in competition with ours. But instead of pooling expertise and pulling together, the individual sites pursued their own political interests and tried to harm their intra-group competitors wherever they could. And it was clear that we had no chance against the Americans with their America First doctrine. So at some point we just did things by the book. The old Mr. Grasmann would have turned in his grave if he had seen what globalization had done to his company!«

»And today everything is better than before the economic crash?«  
Jan asks incredulously.

»You can say that again, boy! Take a look around at your colleagues in production and development. They do identify with the company again and enjoy their work.«

»However, if you look at the employee numbers, we are still a long way from the previous record highs!«



»That may be. But just think what kind of bullshit some colleagues had to deal with in the past. ISO certifications had to be prepared, carried out and meticulously documented. Gender officers checked whether the legal requirements were being complied with. Technical managers were only occupied with acquiring temporary workers, because the employment protection regulations simply no longer permitted permanent employment of employees. And the few permanent employees were busy to train these inexperienced external employees and prepare them for their work. How are innovative ideas supposed to emerge and good products to come out of that?«

»That really doesn't sound good!« Jan replies thoughtfully.

»Today, we once again have a boss at the head of the company who holds the reins firmly in his hands and gives his people clear instructions. In the past, no one dared to make decisions! People hid behind regulations and bureaucratic processes and dragged everything out unnecessarily. Today, the paths are short again and if the boss can be convinced of a good idea, it is immediately put into practice.«

»And that works with fewer employees than before?«

»You bet! When I think of this patent nonsense alone, which spread like a cancer here in the years before the crash! Just ask our older engineers what a circus was organized around every simple technical innovation. When they wrote an invention report, it was reworded by the lawyers and patent attorneys until even the inventor no longer understood the text of the patent specification. In the end, however, it was not about the content of the patents at all, but only about the fact that the large corporations accumulated as large an arsenal of property rights as possible, with which they could sue the small innovative competitors. If you knew how many people were employed in the patent departments of industry and in the national and international patent offices at that time, you would be dizzy. Very few of them contributed to technical innovation. Basically, it was a real innovation-prevention industry that developed there and which, of course, had no interest in abolishing itself again. So the

*legal requirements for the companies were screwed higher and higher until, in the end, a bureaucracy monster was created that stifled any technical progress.«*

*»So you mean that today you can do your business without any bureaucracy?« asks Jan with a doubtful look.*

*»No, of course not. You only have to take a look at the work regulations that you have to follow here. I don't need to remind you that when you signed your employment contract, you signed up to follow the rules contained in it to the best of your knowledge and belief. A certain degree of bureaucracy is essential if people are to work together in a goal-oriented manner. You just have to be careful not to create excesses. Just take a look at the topic of occupational safety. Today, the production manager is also the safety officer of our company. If he catches a worker at the machines without safety shoes, he rants him up so badly that he never forgets to put on his steel-toed shoes again before entering the machine area. In the past, on the other hand, there was a compulsory event every year that every clerk had to attend and where it was explained to him every year anew that he must not climb on swivel chairs and on broken ladders. That the way to the toilet is insured, but the stay on it is not, and all sorts of similar nonsense. What an organizational effort was involved until every employee had been trained accordingly and had confirmed this with his signature! For the topic of occupational safety alone, we had an employee who did nothing else all day but organize the training courses and the associated bureaucracy. You will look in vain for this colleague here today. Despite this, however, fewer occupational accidents occur today than back then. And why? Because people are using their common sense again instead of relying on legal regulations.«*

Jan just nods silently and begins to process the incoming invoices in his inbox. His thoughts, however, are with his dead father. He had also started his career as an electrician and ultimately ended up at the desk as a safety and quality officer. Was that also a "bullshit job," as his colleague Matthias Müller has just contemptuously described it? Would he rather have stayed

an electrician all his working life, just because he might have been more productive as such? Matthias is probably of roughly the same age as his father. Consequently, their life paths and professional experiences would have to be similar in many respects. Would his father share Matthias' views today if he were still alive? Jan can still remember how proud his father always was that he had worked his way up from a small electrician to his responsible position. Financially, it must have been worth it, because his Dad often mentioned that they wouldn't have been able to afford the house, the car and the vacations if he hadn't been so successful professionally. But it was also a fact that his employer had been one of the first to dump him when the economy went down the drain, and that his father had ultimately not been able to cope with that.

Jan's workday ends today with a few false entries. He just can't concentrate properly on work anymore. As he sits on the streetcar home in the afternoon, he thinks to himself:

*»Today, I may have learned more than I did in an entire week of classes at the university.«*

And the next day, as Matthias Müller corrects the bookings of his working student, he thinks:

*»Strange - Jan must have been celebrating the day before yesterday. Normally, he always works quite conscientiously.«*

## **Twist bread**

Just before the sun sets behind the Sabatin Mountains, Gianna sends David to fetch firewood. There is a lot of dry driftwood lying around on the shore of the lake from the last flood. Before long, David has piled up a sizable pile of wood next to the fire pit. Gianna builds a small pyramid out of thin branches, crumples up some newspaper from her purchases, and places the paper inside the wooden pyramid. Then she looks in her backpack for matches and lights the paper. After a few minutes, the pyramid is ablaze and Gianna gradually places thicker pieces of wood on the flames. As she

gets the fire going, she secretly watches David's expression. The guy looks like he's never built a fire in his life. Probably there is no such thing at all in his HiTec domain, with all its nuclear power and solar energy. Gianna seriously considers giving him a lecture on the dangers of handling open fires, but then decides against it for the sake of peace.

After half an hour, the first thick branches have burned down. Gianna fetches the potatoes and carefully places them at the edge of the embers. Then she breaks off four straight branches from a shrub, removes the lateral shoots and sharpens one end to a point with her pocket knife, so that she ultimately holds four thick wooden skewers in her hand. She then unpacks the two fish. Again she begins to rummage in her backpack and this time produces two small metal jars from it. Salt and herb mixture. It's a good thing she had enough time at home to think about what she might need on the road. She expertly seasons the two fish, skewers them and fixes them over the embers.

Next it's the turn of the pizza dough. Gianna kneads the whole mass vigorously and then begins to form a few thin sausages from it. Then she takes the third skewer and wraps the thin dough sausage around the end of the skewer in a spiral. When the top end is completely wrapped with a thin layer of dough, she presses the skewer into David's hand.

*»Here! Hold this over the embers!«*

She repeats the procedure with the last remaining skewer. Silently they sit by the fire and watch the dough on the sticks slowly darken.

*»Have you ever eaten this before?" Gianna asks after a while, when she can't stand the silence anymore.*

*»What's that supposed to be?« David asks. »Indian's pizza?«*

*»Don't tell me you've never tried twist bread!«*

David shakes his head. In his youth, he had often gone barbecuing with his buddies by the river. But there, the focus was more on the alcohol and, at

best, a few hearty spiced chops that Jürgen, whose father was the butcher, had brought along.

*»Tastes really delicious!« David has to admit when he tasted the first piece.*

In no time at all, they have consumed the first two stick breads. Bathing makes hungry.

*»Let's eat two more twist breads,« Gianna suggests. »The fish needs a little more time.«*

Again, they hold their dough sticks over the fire and let themselves be hypnotized by the flickering of the flames.

*»What do you mean, David?« Gianna suddenly begins very thoughtfully. »What would have become of us if this economic catastrophe could have been averted in time back then?«*

*»Then I guess we wouldn't be sitting here today!«*

*»Yeah, I get it. But what would have become of the two of us? Rome would probably be as prosperous a city as Vienna! My parents would have a generous pension and could enjoy their twilight years to the full. So many people would have been spared so much misery!«*

*»Maybe yes, maybe not,« David replies skeptically.*

*»What do you mean?«*

*»This system crash was simply overdue at the time. It could not have gone on indefinitely like that!«*

*»Why not? The way it happened, there was only hardship and misery all over the world. Not a single person got off scot-free back then.«*

*»At first glance, it may seem so,« David replies thoughtfully. »But if I'm honest, I have to say I'm glad it all turned out this way!«*

*»Why is that?« asks Gianna with an incredulous face.*

»The whole world has been living on credit for far too long. And poor people, like my parents and grandparents, have had to pick up the tab!«

»You mean the war in the homeland of your ancestors, has to do with the debt of rich countries?«

»Maybe that too, but that's not what I'm getting at. No, this orgy of debt in the last few years before the crash hit my family very specifically. After the escape from Syria. When they had long since believed themselves safe in Germany. My parents and grandparents were admitted, they were granted asylum, they were allowed to stay, everything seemed fine. But we were dependent on the help of the state and thus trapped in a perfidious system.«

»What do you mean? Have you been treated badly?«

»No. Quite the opposite. Although we couldn't afford to live in Germany, we were picked up by the social system. We were provided with living space and because we couldn't pay the high rents, everything was subsidized by the labor office at the time. At some point, however, the boomerang came back. Suddenly we received regular mail from the Bavarian government, in which they charged us for the accommodation costs we had already accrued. Everything was supposedly just a formality. The various authorities shifted responsibility and money to each other. Everything went along the orderly German bureaucratic lines. Only the cost statement, which my parents received month after month for information, showed higher and higher amounts. My grandparents were already old and sick at that time and could no longer work. My father was a cobbler. All my ancestors were cobblers. Do you have any idea how little money they paid him as an assistant back then? How could he have supported a family? When I was born, my family already had such a mountain of debt that a well-earning German would have needed an entire year's earnings to pay it off. And in Germany at that time, children and parents were mutually liable for their debts. I was born a debtor, so to speak, and would have been condemned to pay off this debt for the rest of my life. The crash reshuffled the cards. Your parents had their well-deserved pension taken away. But the burden of

*innate debt was lifted from my shoulders. It was only because of that crash that I am able to live a free and self-determined life!«*

*»That may all be so,« Gianna says defiantly. »Nevertheless, I think it's unfair that some regions have been bombed back to the Stone Age, so to speak, while other rich domains are once again living the high life as if nothing had happened!«*

*»Yeah, justice is a strange thing,« David muses as he nibbles down the last bits of his twist bread.*

In the meantime, the fish and potatoes are cooked and Gianna takes them out of the fireplace. The meal takes place under difficult conditions due to the lack of suitable table utensils. However, the enjoyment is not significantly affected by this. It tastes wonderful! »The only thing missing is a dry white wine to go with it,« David secretly thinks to himself as he washes down the last few mouthfuls with a hearty gulp from his water bottle.

Gianna is also satisfied with her cooking. After she has eaten the last bite, she goes to the water and brings her mouth and hands back to a reasonably clean state. Then she sits down on the sleeping mat in front of the hut, leans her back against the crooked wall and lets her eyes glide over the black lake. The moon is reflected in it and transforms the entire landscape in a magical light.

»This David is a strange fellow,« she thinks. Not at all like she had always imagined people in the rich domains to be. She had always had a rather concrete image of such a typical Danube dweller in her head. Rich, arrogant, ruthless and always looking out for their advantage. Such a fat capitalist pig, who is only out to exploit the inhabitants of other domains for his own benefit. David does not fit into this picture at all. Neither outwardly, nor from his kind. Basically, it is really crass, if one compares his life, with that of his cousin Mohammad in Rome. Why does one of them live in the Roman slums and earn his meager wages as a costume slave in a speakeasy, while the other leads a yuppie life in posh Vienna?

Just because their fathers once sat in different cars! One was lucky, the other unlucky. Now their sons live in two completely different worlds. It could just as easily have gone the other way. Then she might have met David years ago in Rome. Who can know?

Suddenly Gianna is abruptly torn from her thoughts. A strange person suddenly stands next to her and asks her:

*»What are you guys doing here?«*

Gianna flinches as if she had seen the devil. This figure has appeared so suddenly and unexpectedly out of nowhere that her heart is pounding up to her throat. Only slowly does she realize that there is a boy of about fourteen years standing in front of her.

*»You scared me!« she says to him after she has calmed down a bit.*

*»Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I live up there and come here often in the evenings for fishing.«*

At the same time, he points in the direction of the shore road. Gianna hadn't seen any houses up there, but the area isn't very manageable either. So it could well be that there is a farm or a house somewhere up there on the other side of the road.

*»Do you like twist bread?« Gianna asks the boy kindly.*

*»I'd love to! I'll just put the rod in the water first,« he replies.*

He throws a handful of yellow grains into the lake, then casts his fishing rod and deftly attaches it to the shore. Then he takes a handful of dough from Gianna's bowl and, with a few hand movements, covers one of the wooden skewers. As he holds it in over the embers, he repeats his initial question:

*»So what are you guys doing here now?«*

*»We are pilgrims on our way to Rome. We just want to spend the night here and set off again tomorrow.«*



*»I saw you guys here yesterday!«*

*»Uh, yeah right. Well, I didn't say we just got here today!«*

*»What are you doing in Rome?«*

*»Well, we want to visit the holy places and ask God to forgive our sins!«*

*»My parents also once lived in Rome. But they left. They say the devil lives in Rome!«*

*»Why is that?« asks Gianna, somewhat unsettled.*

*»I don't know. They just say so."*

*»Have you ever been to Rome?« Gianna wants to know.*

*»No, my parents go there often to the market. But I always stay at home and have to watch the farm. Or I have to go to school in town.«*

*»To Anguillara?«*

*»Yes, where else? Is that your husband?" the boy asks, pointing to David.*

*»No, this is an acquaintance I met on my pilgrimage. He comes from far away and doesn't speak our language. What is your name?«*

*»Mario. Why don't you have to work? My parents couldn't go on a pilgrimage like that. They say if we don't work in the fields every day in the summer, we'll have to starve in the winter!«*

*»We live very modestly. For our pilgrimage we had to save for years,« Gianna fibs as best she can.*

*»But you didn't catch those fish here! You must have bought them at the market! You can only find them on the other side of the lake at Bracciano!«*

As he does so, he points to the remains of their meal, of which there is not much left except for two fish heads, two tail fins and a lot of bones.

*»You're right about that! We bought these at the market in Anguillara. You should be a detective! Do you know what a detective is?«*

*»No. But I know that the fish at the market is very expensive. My parents never buy fish. They say what's free on your doorstep, you don't buy at the market!«*

*»Your parents are absolutely right,« Gianna tries to justify herself. »But unfortunately we can only take the bare essentials with us on our pilgrimage. And a fishing rod fits badly into our backpack. That's why we sometimes have to get supplies at the market.«*

*»It's okay,« the boy says as he finishes his twist bread.*

Then he suddenly jumps up and runs to his fishing rod on the water. With quick movements, he reels in the line and pulls a magnificent fish out of the water. He deftly releases it from the hook and sends it flying with a well-aimed blow to the head. Then he makes his way home with his prey.

*»Will you still be there tomorrow?« he asks in passing.*

*»It's possible,« Gianna replies. »We don't know that for sure yet. Give my best to your parents!«*

*»Thank you, I'll pass the message on!« the boy calls back.*

Then he disappears into the darkness.

## **Outsider**

*»Gay pig!« the man abruptly shouts at Jan as he gets off the streetcar on his way home. »People like you would have been gassed in the old days!«*

Jan's blood freezes in his veins. At first, he doesn't know how to react to this attack. He knows this guy by sight. He usually sits drunk in front of

some house in Jan's residential district and mobs passers-by. Today he is at the streetcar stop and comments loudly on the passengers getting on and off.

Jan is really in shock. How could this antisocial subject verbally attack him in public, in front of everyone and for no reason? Only when Jan reaches his apartment and the door locks behind him does his racing pulse calm down.

*»What's wrong with you?« asks Kevin when he sees Jan come in, white as a sheet.*

*»Something unbelievable just happened to me! You know that bum who often hangs out here in the neighborhood drunk and chats up people?«*

*»Yeah - everyone knows him and his buddies from the park.«*

*»When I got off the streetcar just now, he called me a gay pig in front of everyone and yelled around that I should be gassed!«*

*»For no reason?«*

*»Yes! I got out, he saw me and already he started yelling!«*

*»I don't believe it!« Kevin replies, visibly shocked. »How did the other passers-by react?«*

*»They all looked away in embarrassment. No one seemed to care!«*

Jan and Kevin have long been connected by more than just their apartment lease. Soon after Kevin moved into the shared flat, they discovered their affection for each other and have been living in a more or less permanent relationship ever since. Both had deliberately chosen Cologne as their place of study. The city had always been considered open and tolerant and offered a wide range of gay and lesbian venues of all kinds. With the collapse of the economy, however, the mood had suddenly changed. The worse off the population was, the more openly discrimination against

minorities became. Foreigners, non-Christians and gays were the preferred victims.

History seemed to repeat itself: "Beaten to death - silenced" was once written on the memorial on the banks of the Rhine that was supposed to commemorate the gay and lesbian victims of National Socialism. The destruction of this "pink stain" was one of the first actions of the unleashed mob that had taken up the cause of the right of the strongest and the suppression of all deviants. And there was no one left who could have put a stop to this spook.

*»I thought we were getting past these dark times,« Kevin groans.*

*»Dream on! Things will never be the same again. Do you still remember how the politicians wanted to get marriage for all off the ground back then? No one would say such a proposal out loud today. I have the feeling that a society that is doing badly always bullies its weakest members to compensate for its own deficits. And those in power do nothing about it, lest they lose favor with the mob.«*

*»Sure. As long as you live in luxury, you can occupy yourself with the most amazing things: Environmental protection, political correctness or gender mainstreaming. But when you have to fight for bare survival, man's baser instincts come out in the open. Then it's just a matter of gathering together and bludgeoning everything that doesn't belong to one's own group. Those are nevertheless age-old behaviors, which come up there.«*

*»I am of the opinion that everyone should be able to think about the consequences of their actions. After all, I didn't go and just bash in the skull of the bum who molested me!«*

*»He deserved it, if you ask me!« Kevin answers coolly.*

*»Maybe, but then I wouldn't be a bit better than him. He just talks stupidly and only does that because the alcohol has eaten away the last bit of his brain.«*

*»Maybe so. Let's talk about something else! You can't undo that anyway. I also have some interesting news: you know Franzi and Heike.«*

*»Yes, why?« asks Jan.*

*»Franzi asked me today if Patrick's and Elena's rooms are already taken elsewhere.«*

*»I don't believe it! You mean those two are interested in moving into our shared apartment? A gay-lesbian four-flat-share? I think you're nuts!«*

*»Why not? The two girls are quite nice. They're probably tired of the stupid comments they have to listen to all the time. If they form a mixed four-person flat share with us now, they won't have to justify themselves to anyone all the time.«*

*»Can it be that this is also your ulterior motive? That with two women in our shared apartment, you won't be so obviously mistaken for gay anymore?«*

*»So what? What would be so bad about that? As far as I know, the two of them can cook quite well, have a regular income and are otherwise quite sociable! Sooner or later, we'll have to look for two new roommates anyway. In any case, I can't afford the current rent in the long run!«*

Jan thinks for a moment and then says:

*"Why don't you invite those two over for dinner? Then we can talk about it.«*

## **Sutri**

David and Gianna spend another day at their campsite on Lake Bracciano. Here they feel safe. And after the hell of the previous days, they feel like in paradise. During the day they swim or doze relaxed in the shade of the trees. In the evening Mario comes by again with his fishing rod. This time he brings two big plates with warm polenta and greetings from his mother.

Well sated, Gianna and David crawl into their sleeping bags at night. Determined to get up early tomorrow morning and hit the road again.

Even before it is really light, they are actually already on the road. Always along the shore road towards the north. Just before they reach Trevignano, they leave the lake and follow an old road towards the town of Sutri. If they can trust their map, they should rejoin the official pilgrimage route just before Sutri. The longer they stay away from the main roads, the better - they think. The path leads them, always slightly ascending, up to the green hill ranges that surround the lake on its northern side. The weather is not quite as kind to them today. There is no sign of the sun, and the dark clouds coming in from the sea do not bode well.

At a brisk pace, the two walk through the lush vegetation without talking much. The two days of rest undoubtedly have done them good. They are bursting with zest for action and energy. The further they get from Trevignano, the wilder and more untouched the surroundings appear. Oak woods and sparsely vegetated macchia areas alternate. The conical shape of some hills suggests the volcanic origin of this wild landscape. And it becomes quiet. Finally no more barking of dogs! Dogs - by nature apparently the natural enemies of every pilgrim. On their way so far, they had not passed any homestead where one of these yapping fellows had not tried to drive them away. Gianna, as a Roman, is used to dealing with street mutts. But the dogs they encounter obviously know exactly who belongs here and who doesn't. And these stupid four-legged friends know very well that Gianna and David have no business being here.

The path is monotonous. Mostly dead straight and always slightly uphill. At some point they reach the crest. Somewhere ahead, down on the other side in the valley, must be the town of Sutri. Gianna stops. She turns slowly and looks back. Below, Lake Bracciano glistens peacefully, and beyond it - somewhere in the haze - lies Rome. Her city. Will she ever return there? Where are her parents now? Will she ever see them again? What will become of her friends? Will they be safe? Gianna bashfully

wipes a few tears from her face. Then she looks ahead and follows David, who has not yet noticed that he has lost his companion.

No sooner have they crossed the pass than it starts to rain. First lightly, then more and more strongly. They take their rain jackets out of their backpacks and seek shelter under a large tree. For a while the canopy keeps the rain off, but little by little thicker and thicker drops plop down on them from the crown. There's no alternative. They have to keep walking in the rain. For hours they walk as if in a trance through the never-ending drizzle. Only when shortly before Sutri they come across the Via Cassio and thus the official pilgrimage route again, the sky begins to clear and the rain stops. In the meantime, however, they are completely soaked. Their rain jackets have kept the water out, but they are soaked from the inside. The water is standing in their shoes and they don't have rainproof pants with them anyway.

*Suddenly Gianna exclaims: »Do you see the Campanile on the hill ahead? That must be Sutri!«*

Indeed - in front of them rises from the valley the ancient city of the Etruscans. People had already settled in this place a thousand years before our era. It is said that the mysterious rites of Mithras were celebrated here. The followers of this mysterious cult came together to celebrate a kind of communion, in the course of which animal sacrifices were offered. At least, this is suspected based on a gutter visible on the ground, which may have served to collect the animal blood. But maybe archaeologists just sometimes have a little too vivid an imagination.

*»Look here on the left!« exclaims David. »That looks like a city gate!«*

The two leave the road and follow an inconspicuous path that leads to a small portal in the rocks. After passing through it, they are not in the city, but in the middle of a large arena.

*»David look!« Gianna exclaims enthusiastically. »This place looks like the Colosseum! The spectator stands, the aisles, the*

*stairs. Everything like in Rome, only in miniature and not built of stones, but hewn into the rock. It looks like a miniature negative of the original!«*

In fact, the monumental structure is an ancient Roman amphitheater, carved out of the soft tufa hill as early as the time of the Emperor Augustus. Gianna knows that the ancient Romans had built their monstrous play arenas all over Europe. But she had never heard of this structure, which lies virtually at the gates of her city.

*»It's dry in the covered walkways!« says David. »Shall we spend the night here?«*

*»Out of the question!« Gianna replies firmly. »I want a dry bed and something decent to eat today! I'm sure there are pilgrim hostels in Sutri. And that's where we're going now!«*

David can't do much to counter this. He, too, would be happy to finally get out of his wet clothes. But it's not just the desire for a little bit of comfort that makes Gianna react so energetically. Just the idea of spending the night here in this historic place gives her the creeps. Who knows how blood-soaked this floor is! She certainly couldn't sleep a wink here all night.

They leave the arena and return to the road. Now it is only a few hundred meters to their destination. A narrow, steep gravel path leads them out of the valley up to the old town, which towers like an eagle's nest above the bizarre landscape. Gianna asks an oncoming woman if there is a pilgrim hostel in town. The woman nods and sends her straight on.

*»Just through the old town until you reach Porta Morone. Just before it is the large Carmelite monastery. You can't miss it! Pilgrims often stay there overnight.«*

The old town is bustling with activity. Some people stop and watch the strangers with suspicious eyes. But most people simply go their way and take no notice of the two. When they reach the great basilica, the alleys become even narrower than it already was. It is impossible for two carts to



pass each other here. It is also almost impossible to get lost here. The city lies like a narrow towel on the hill and only a few alleys lead to the west, to the end of the old town. The closer they get to their destination, the more they notice the many monks and nuns walking quickly throughout the city. When they see a white archway at the end of the street, Gianna asks a passing nun if she knows where the pilgrim hostel is.

*»In the nunnery, just ahead on the right, there are overnight rooms for the pilgrims,« she replies kindly. »Just ask the sister at the gate!«*

Monasteries throughout southern Italy had experienced an unprecedented renaissance after the global economic collapse. Whereas in the period before, one monastery after another had to close because of an acute shortage of young people, after the crash the situation suddenly turned around. Many people were so impoverished that they sought their salvation in the bosom of Mother Church. Many parents who were no longer able to feed their children were also happy to know that they were in the safe care of a monastery. The Catholic Church reacted very quickly to the new challenges. In a hastily convened Third Vatican Council, among other things, lay brotherhoods and lay sisterhoods were reintroduced in the monasteries. As a result, there was again, as a hundred years ago and long before, a two-class society within the religious communities. The ordained monastic priests and the choir sisters formed an elite and spiritual level of leadership. The lay members also had to take vows, but were entrusted with simple manual tasks. Not only monks and nuns lived strictly separate lives. The consecrated and non-consecrated also lived in different buildings of the monastery area. In Sutri, the once tiny Carmelite monastery has now spread over several streets. Over a thousand monks and nuns now pray and work in the service of the Lord and the monastery. The lay brothers mostly in agriculture and in the many fields that have belonged to the monastery since time immemorial. The lay sisters work mainly in the monastery gardens and the textile mills. Today, the convent

of the Camelites represents by far the most important economic factor in the entire surrounding area of the city.

*»Greetings!« the nun shouts at the monastery gate. »You look like you want to spend the night here with us tonight!«*

*»Yes with pleasure!« Gianna replies. »My brother and I are completely soaked. It would be nice if we could find a dry bed and something to eat here.«*

*»Can I see your IDs, please?«*

Gianna winces. Why do they want to see her papers now? Was it perhaps not a good idea to visit such a pilgrim hostel after all? She whispers softly *»Passport!«* to David, while she begins to search in her backpack for the document. The nun is taken aback when she sees two substitute Vatican passes in front of her instead of the usual identification documents. But then, without further inquiry, she transfers the names into her thick book and hands them back to them.

*»So you have already been to Rome! Very few pilgrims walk back the way they came. Most of those who come through here are going the other way. You look pretty wet!«*

She looks in David's direction and actually expects an answer from him.

*»My brother has been deaf since birth and can't talk to you,« Gianna says quickly, hoping David won't make a stupid mistake now. »Yes, it really rained most of the day today and we are soaking wet to the bone.«*

*»Do you want the stamp in your pilgrim's book right away?« the nun asks, already reaching into the shelf next to her.*

*»Uh, no. We both don't give any importance to that kind of thing. We're more interested in, uh, more spiritual values. No, we don't need a stamp like that.«*

*»As you wish! I often wonder myself about some pilgrims. Many seem to be only interested in collecting as many different stamps*

*as possible in their booklet. Some even are passing by and want a stamp without spending the night!«*

The nun shakes her head uncomprehendingly and then goes into a small adjoining room. She returns with two stacks of blankets and towels.

*»That's for you! You have to go up the stairs in front. The dormitory for the men is on the first floor. The women's dormitory is on the second floor. The dining room is just up here on the left. Dinner is at eight o'clock. At seven o'clock there is Holy Mass. Attendance is voluntary, of course. If you want to meet in between, you can always do so in the dining room. Please do not meet in the dormitories, even if you are brothers and sisters! Our rules are quite clear and unfortunately we cannot make exceptions in your case. I hope you understand. If you have any questions, you know where to find me. So Cesare and Gloria, have a great stay with us!«*

She takes a small bell and rings it three times in quick succession. It is not long before a girl of about sixteen in a white habit comes rushing up.

*»This here is our novice Gianna! Gianna please lead our two guests upstairs and show them to their sleeping quarters!«*

*»Yes, with pleasure Sister Mary,« the girl answers shyly.*

Wordlessly, she walks ahead into the old stairwell. The walls look as if they had already experienced the times of the Inquisition. Who knows - maybe it has. When they reach the first floor, the novice only points briefly in the direction of the men's dormitory. David wordlessly follows her pointing and disappears into a large room. On the second floor, Gianna Marconi - alias Gloria Montebello - is accompanied by the young novice to the women's dormitory.

*»You can choose a free bed,« Sister Gianna says in a soft tone. »If there's something on a bed, it's already reserved by someone. But there should still be a few beds available.«*

*»Thank you very much!« Gianna Marconi says kindly and puts her blanket and towel on the nearest free bed. »So your name is Gianna? Is that your real name or your religious name?«*

*»My real name is Melania. But when I entered the convent, they told me that I couldn't be called that here, so they gave me the name Gianna instead. I think Gianna is a beautiful name too!«*

*»I didn't even know there was a Saint Gianna!« says the Gianna, with the escape name Gloria, to the Melania with the religious name Gianna.*

*»Yes, yes,« the girl replies. »Saint Gianna was canonized by the Pope forty-eight years ago. Because of her uterus. And what is your name?«*

*»Gianna, uh Gloria! You mean she was canonized because she saw Our Lady!«*

*»No, because of her uterus she has been canonized!«*

For Gianna Marconi, it's all getting to be too much. Before she gets even more confused by all the Giannas and abstruse saint stories, she prefers to change the subject:

*»Have you already taken your vows?« she asks curiously.*

*»No, I won't be officially accepted into the order until next year, and then I have to take my vows.«*

Then she quickly turns around and disappears from the room without another word. Gianna remains stunned and stares at her empty bed. Could she imagine a life behind convent walls? The poverty thing might not be so bad. She had lived in very modest circumstances all her life and actually always got along well. But the chastity thing? No thanks! If others want to keep it up all their lives - let them. But she certainly won't! And then the obedience! To swear an oath to obey all orders of the abbess without contradiction and discussion? That is really the very last thing Gianna can imagine. Fleeing to a nunnery would perhaps be a theoretical possibility to

hide from her persecutors. But Gianna would rather be quartered as a martyr in St. Peter's Square than to take these vows.

## **The blue Iller**

*"Really, young man, you're looking for a doctorate?«*

Professor Guggenmoser greets Jan Eckert when he visits the university's Chair of Domain Economics.

Jan has now completed his master's degree in economics. His grades were so good that he spontaneously decided to add a doctorate. Originally, he had planned to leave the university with his master's degree and enter professional life. However, a doctorate would undoubtedly open up even more career opportunities for him. And if he ultimately didn't want to spend his life doing research and teaching, the doctorate would at least help him get a higher-paying job. In any case, Jan decided to at least give it a try. If he doesn't find a doctoral position, he can always apply for a job in the private sector. After all, good managers are always needed.

The fact that he has a job interview today with Professor Guggenmoser seems like in irony of fate. He has known the professor for many years now and was actually always very skeptical about his domain theories. In the meantime, however, Guggenmoser's thought model has become firmly established in so many parts of the world that the smart professor has mutated into an economic expert and media star. The University of Cologne has founded a new chair for domain economics especially for him, which he is currently setting up with great vigor. In this light, it is actually not such a big coincidence that Jan received an offer for a doctoral position from this chair, of all places.

*»What do you want to research, Mr. Eckert? Do you already have concrete ideas?«*

*"Oh, Professor Guggenmoser, domain economics is such a young field of science, I'm sure there are countless opportunities to get involved academically.«*

*»Indeed! We can hardly save ourselves from research orders at the moment. In the scientific literature, domain theory is still a blank spot on the map and is just waiting to be described. We currently have several topics on which we are doing research and from which one could make a good doctoral thesis. Therefore I ask you for your preferences. Maybe there is already something suitable for your interests in our PhD database!«*

*»No, I don't have a specific research project in mind at the moment. But perhaps we could look through the list of your current research projects together. I'm sure there will be one or two topics there that would be of interest to me and that I could get involved in!«*

*»No, no, young man,« laughs the professor, »we don't want to make it that easy for our future employees at the chair! We expect a little more initiative from you than from a normal bachelor's or master's student. After all, as a doctoral student at my department, you also have to lead seminars and make a credible impression on our students. Why don't you tell me what you know about the domain system? Or no - let's be more specific: What do you think are the biggest problems with a domain-based boundary definition!«*

*»Well, yes,« Jan replies, visibly uncertain. »There are various problems there. But they are more caused by sociology. Human societies are formed primarily on the basis of unifying factors such as ethnicity, language and religion.«*

*»No, no!« the professor interrupts him. »You misunderstand me! It's already clear that there are any number of problems when you force grown communities into new rigid boundaries. We could discuss this for days and not come to a satisfactory solution. Just consider the theoretical problems of boundary definitions based on watershed topology. And don't come at me now, as the colleague did yesterday, with the Garzweiler hole!«*

*»The Garzweiler hole?« Jan asks, irritated. »What does the brown coal open cut mining in Garzweiler have to do with the domain system?«*

*»Indeed, I asked myself the same question!« Guggenmoser replies, visibly amused. »Your dear fellow student argued yesterday that the pits of the open cut mining would be irregularities within the Rhine domain. The water that flows into the open pit is lost to the Rhine river system. He argued that there would therefore be domainless islands within the Rhine domain that might tend toward independence efforts because of their topology.«*

*»An interesting thought!« Jan thinks, but then immediately tries to counteract it: »However, he didn't think it through to the end. The water in the pit ends up in the Rhine again via the groundwater and the drainage pumps. This proves beyond doubt that it belongs to the Rhine domain. Moreover, from a domain point of view, the pits behave like normal lakes. When, during the economic crisis, the groundwater pumps could no longer be operated, the open pits were in danger of flooding anyway. At some point, instead of the pit, there would have been only a huge lake, and this in turn would have drained toward the Rhine.«*

*»Respect young man! You seem to be qualified for analytical thinking! But now I would like to know, where you assume an example of a genuine irregularity!«*

Jan feverishly thinks about what the professor could mean by that. Suddenly he remembers the story with the Danube that his former roommate Patrick had once told him. Patrick had been an ardent supporter of Guggenmoser's domain theory from the very beginning and had studied the subject intensively. In this process, he had repeatedly annoyed the flatmates with his latest findings. But Jan had remembered the Danube and Rhine issue because it revealed one of the many weaknesses of the domain system.

*»In the upper reaches of the Danube, there are a few places where the water seeps into the ground over a large area. It has been proven that the percolated water resurfaces a few kilometers further south and flows from there into Lake Constance. Thus, however, it is located in the river system of the Rhine. This has dramatic consequences in terms of domain boundaries! The*

*amount of percolated water varies very much, if one looks at it over the whole year. About half of the year the upper course of the Danube seeps completely towards the Rhine. On these days, the upper reaches of the Danube clearly belong to the Rhine domain and not to the Danube domain. On the other hand, on the days when the Danube apparently does not percolate completely, the affiliation to the Danube domain is obvious. To which domain, then, should the inhabitants of this large catchment area feel they belong?«*

*»Very good, Mr. Eckert! That is indeed one of the few weak points that a river-based domain system brings with it. I see that you have already dealt with the matter in detail. But what would you recommend to the inhabitants of the upper reaches of the Danube for the future?«*

*»Geologists agree that, in the long term, the Danube in its upper course will flow completely toward the Rhine. This will shift the watershed. The inhabitants living upstream from the sinking point will then undoubtedly belong to the Rhine domain. However, then the question of renaming the current Danube domain also arises. If the Danube becomes a tributary of the Rhine, then it is hardly suitable as a name giver for the river system named after it at present! This would have to be renamed then probably rather in Iller or Inn, depending upon which criteria the main river of this system is defined.«*

*»Slow down, young man,« the professor puts the brakes on Jan's remarks. »I really can't imagine that the Viennese at the Opera Ball would like it if they had to spin around during the Illerwaltz. A more pragmatic solution will have to be found. Then the Danube will be created from the confluence of Krähenbach and Elta, just as the Weser has been created from the confluence of Fulda and Werra. Maybe the Danube domain will have to pay us a few billion dollars for the naming rights, but we will certainly be able to reach an agreement.«*

Jan and the professor grin at each other. The ice between the two seems to be broken. A very lively discussion follows about the possible influences of irregular domain boundaries on cross-domain trade and financial



relations. When Jan says goodbye, he is confident about getting the PhD position and having found a sympathetic PhD supervisor in Professor Guggenmoser.

## **Monastic life**

Gianna is just about to spread out the sleeping bag on her narrow bed when she is approached by a woman:

*»Hello, do you speak Italian?«*

*»Oh! Yeah, right! I hadn't seen you at all!«*

The woman is probably a few years older than she is. From the top bunk of her bed, which is a few meters away, she grins broadly at Gianna. When Gianna entered the dormitory with the novice, she must have been lying quietly on her bed.

*»I was just writing in my diary. That's probably why you didn't notice me.«*

*»Yeah right! I thought I was here alone.«*

*»I hope I didn't scare you!«*

*»No, no. I was just a little lost in thought.«*

*»My name is Alice.«*

*»I am Gloria,« Gianna replies.*

*»Are you going to Rome, too?«*

*»My brother and I are already coming from there. We are on our way back.«*

*»Oh! Then you've already come a long way! How far do you still have to go?«*

*»We come from Milan,« says Gianna.*

*»Well that's a coincidence! I'm from Milan too! But it's a big city. Where do you live?«*

*»Uh, in the west of Milan. Are you traveling alone?«*

Gianna quickly tries to change the subject. Her passport says that she comes from Milan. But the capital of the Po domain is just as foreign to her as Timbuktu.

*»Yes, I'm walking the pilgrimage alone,« Alice replies. »I set off from home and have been walking for four weeks now. But now I'll soon have made it! From Rome, however, I will fly back. There and back - that would really be too stressful for me!«*

*»Oh, that's all right. You just have to give yourself enough time.«*

*»I was already having trouble getting six weeks of unpaid leave. If I had wanted to stay away any longer, I would probably have to look for a new job. I work as a designer in the fashion industry. My boss freaked out when I told him I was going on a pilgrimage for six weeks. I really needed it though! The job has been so stressful lately that I was on the verge of burnout. So how much time have you planned for your tour?«*

*»Uh, my brother and I just quit our jobs and we're going to look for something new when we get back. We actually have as much time as we want.«*

Gianna hopes she doesn't blush at all this fibbing.

*»Oh, you guys have it good! How I envy you! I think there's no better way to find yourself again than pilgrimage. Not that I am particularly religious! But this being alone - on the way and in nature! The moment you leave the border fence of the Po domain behind you, you feel like you are in another world. Here everything is so primitive and yet tremendously authentic! Like in a huge open-air museum! Don't you feel the same way?«*

*»Uh, well, I wouldn't call it an open-air museum!« says Gianna, slightly irritated.*

*»What was your experience of Rome like? As a Milanese, it must be a real culture shock when you're confronted with all this misery. Here in the country, things have probably always been a bit more rustic. But cities like Rome and Florence! They used to be in no way inferior to Milan! When you pass through them on your pilgrimage, you feel like you've been transported to another time. This is awesome!«*

*»Yes, you can look at it that way,« Gianna says, slightly annoyed.*

*Alice continues unperturbed, »I just feel sorry for the poor people. This little novice, for example. Such a young inexperienced girl! She will probably have to spend her whole life here in this convent. Whether she wants to or not!«*

*»Did you hear what she was saying about that Saint Gianna?" asks Gianna.*

*»Yes, I did. Pretty spooky, huh? Who knows how the nuns explained that story to her.«*

Alice shakes her head uncomprehendingly. Gianna is curious now, though.

*»Is there any truth to the story about the uterus?«*

*»Don't tell me you don't know! Every child in Milan knows that! This canonization is still being fiercely debated to this day!«*

*»I guess it must have passed me by,« Gianna says, a little unsettled.*

*»Gianna Beretta Molla was an ordinary woman from Milan. When she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was diagnosed with a benign tumor on her uterus. In order to treat it, she would have had to have an abortion. She refused and later died as a result of the childbirth. That was in 1962 and forty-two years later she was canonized for it by Pope John Paul II.«*

*»That's a sad story,« Gianna says. »But why is one canonized for something like this? As a mother, didn't she behave irresponsibly towards her three already born children? After all, these had to grow up without a mother!«*

*»That is why the case is still so hotly debated today. Is it permissible to weigh one life against another or several other lives? The Catholic Church has taken a very clear position and says no.«*

Gianna has enough of religious issues for now. In her opinion, it was solely up to this woman whether she decides for or against an abortion. That the Catholic Church instrumentalizes such a tragic case for its own purposes is once again typical! But before Gianna gets even more upset and speaks outrageous things here in the convent, she says to Alice:

*»I'm going to dry off now. I'm still soaked from today's walk. And after that, I'm going to see what my brother is up to. I'll see you later.«*

*»Ciao, see you later!« Alice replies and delves back into her diary.*

Gianna leaves the dormitory and disappears into the neighboring washroom. David, meanwhile, has also reserved a bed in his dorm room. He has exchanged his wet clothes for a new set of dry ones and then made himself comfortable on his bed. He has almost dozed off when he is approached by a young man of about the same age who is just entering the dormitory:

*»Hi! How are you?«*

*»Thank you very much! And yourself?« replies David reflexively.*

*»How do you know I speak German?«*

*»I don't know. I just suspected it. There are enough German speakers running around here! Where are you from?«*

*»Vienna. And you?«*

*»Munich. Then we come from the same domain. It's a small world!«*

*»And the Danube domain is big. My name is David. What's your name?«*

*»Ludwig. You can call me Wiggerl. Are you traveling alone?«*

*»No, I'm on the road with my girlfriend. We just got here. She sleeps one floor above us.«*

*»Yes, in the monastery hostels they are still very strict about gender segregation. Why didn't you go to a private hostel?«*

*»We were glad to find a dry place to stay at all after the long hike in the rain.«*

*»Are you going to Rome?« Ludwig wants to know.*

*»No, we come from there and go the other way.«*

*»So you're going there and back! I figured you were a hiking freak right away! Looking at your shoes and backpack! Man! You've sure come a long way!«*

The Bavarian looks amused at David's worn-out shoes and the second-hand backpack, which can certainly look back on a long life as a pilgrim.

*»Uh, no, I flew to Rome and met my girlfriend there. We go on pilgrimage from Rome north to Milan. After that, we'll see!«*

*»Oh - yeah - why not? I've already met the funniest people on my tour. Why not go against the flow? Some pilgrims also travel by bus and hardly ever walk. Why not? As long as you have fun doing it!«*

*»There is a bus?« David asks curiously.*

*»Logical! A Milanese company fills this market niche. Once a week, an ancient rattletrap bus runs from Piacenza to Rome and back. You can get on and off at all the important pilgrimage sites on the Via Francigena. The bus takes a full day for the one-way trip, although the stretch between Piacenza and the Cisa Pass is no problem. The pass is on the watershed of the Po domain. Behind it begins Italian Anatolia, as you can imagine. There is a schedule, but a couple of hours back and forth is not uncommon with the cruel road conditions here.«*

*»So you mean this bus also stops here in Sutri and you could get on here and head north?«*

*»Yeah right! Tomorrow he's on the road again. He leaves early in the morning from Rome and should arrive here after two or three hours. I'm sure there's a timetable at the gate. But it isn't cheap, I'll tell you that right now! Even in our Danube currency. A local could never afford it.«*

David's pulse accelerates more and more. He has to tell Gianna about these new findings immediately. He says goodbye to his new roommate and goes down to the monastery gate. Maybe Gianna is already down there somewhere. He takes a look into the dining room, still empty at this hour, and actually sees Gianna sitting at one of the tables. She is reading a book that she has obviously taken from the pilgrims' library. David knows that he should play the mute again down here, so as not to arouse suspicion from the sister at the gate. He makes sure that no one is watching him and whispers softly in Gianna's ear:

*»We need to talk! Let's go outside!«*

Together they leave the dining room and walk to the exit of the monastery. As they pass the bulletin board, David stops and beckons Gianna to him. His eyes fly over the many notes and notices until he finds what he was looking for. One of the notices reads in large letters:

***FRANCIGENA TOURS: PIACENZA - ROMA***

Without saying anything, he points to the timetable. Gianna doesn't quite know what he wants from her. She looks at the notice briefly and then shrugs her shoulders. But here she can hardly ask him what he means. They leave the monastery and walk through the nearby Porta Morone. In the shadow of the city wall, they look for a quiet spot and sit down on the grass.

*»What's so important?« Gianna wants to know.*

*»I met a pilgrim in my dorm room who told me something very interesting!«*

*»You talked to someone? You do realize that this could easily expose us? I passed you off as deaf to the nun at the gate, as we agreed! And you talk to the next person who crosses your path?«*

*»Okay, I made a mistake. But he spoke to me in German and I answered automatically before I gave it much thought. Do you know how hard that is to play a deaf-mute?«*

*»It may be that it is difficult. But it is important if we want to survive this! The Vatican has its spies surely everywhere! Especially in a monastery we should take care!«*

*»I know. I'm sorry. I can't very well undo it. But I don't think Ludwig is going to rat us out.«*

*»So what did he tell you?«*

*»He said that there is a bus here on the Via Francigena that goes from Rome to Piacenza once a week. Tomorrow morning it comes through Sutri here and we could just hop on and ride. All the way to Piacenza! That's already in the Po domain!«*

*»I think you're crazy!« Gianna answers dryly.*

*»Why?«*

*»Because then we would have to officially enter the Po domain at the border. Do you seriously believe that we'll hold out our passes to them there and they'll wave us through? Like here at the borders of the dwarf domains? They check our identity immediately with their computers! How long do you think it will take them to find out that there is no Gloria Montebello and no Cesare Botazzi in Milan?«*

*»Then we'll just drive to just before the border and get off there. The main thing is that we don't have to walk all that long way!«*

*»What are you going to use to pay for the ride?« Gianna asks. »I only glanced shortly at this timetable, but I saw the fares! That*

*would make a huge hole in our travel budget! So much money for a bus ride! That's insane!«*

*»Now calm down!« David says in a placating tone. »It's not that much money! I promise I'll give it back to you as soon as I can.«*

*»Yes yes, just like you want to give me back the money for the hiking boots. You had to add a big tip for the Syrian cobbler, even though you don't have a single lire in your pocket!«*

*»I'll really give it all back to you as soon as I get home. You have my word of honor! It's not my fault they robbed me either!«*

*»Don't lie to me like that!« Gianna replies with tears in her eyes. »You can't give me the money back. You just want to go home as quickly as possible and then you'll be fine. But what should I do? It doesn't matter to me where I spend the next few weeks. Here in Sutri or further up north. What difference does it make? I don't have a home anymore and I don't know where to go or how long my money will last. And now you come along and want to go home with my money on some shitty tourist bus! Do what you want, but leave me alone with it!«*

Gianna gets up and runs crying back towards the monastery. David remains sitting, transfixed. This is really not how he had imagined the conversation. He thinks feverishly about how he might be able to convince Gianna of his plan. But he has no idea. He screwed up and hurt her feelings. That was not what he had wanted.

Gianna spends the time before dinner lying on her bed in her dorm room. She stares at the ceiling and thinks of home. If only she had never left! Then, to make matters worse, Alice comes in and lectures her about the ever-increasing wealth gap between the southern and northern domains. At some point, the dinner bell rings. Gianna has pretty much lost her appetite. After the long hike, however, she needs to eat something to keep up her strength. More than ten pilgrims are already gathered in the dining hall, waiting for the food counter to finally open. David is also already sitting at one of the tables. He seems anything but happy. Gianna sits down with



him and seeks his eye contact. They look deeply into each other's eyes for a while, but then they lower their eyes back down to the massive tabletop. Finally, the food counter opens. There is bean stew with noodles. While David and Gianna wordlessly eat their food, Ludwig comes into the dining room. He picks up a large plate of stew and then recognizes his roommate.

*»Hello David! Surely I can sit with you and your girlfriend!«*

While David remains sheepishly silent, Gianna tries to save the situation and answers quietly:

*»We have taken an absolute vow of silence at all meals during the pilgrimage. We have seen some monks and nuns do this and are now trying to follow through. Please do not speak to us while we are here in the dining hall!«*

*»Oh, all right! I understand! I tell no word any more.«*

David almost chokes on his beans when he hears this. And Ludwig thinks to himself once again what a crazy bunch these pilgrims are. While the guests at the neighboring tables talk loudly about the experiences of the past day, there is a ghostly silence at Gianna's, David's and Ludwig's table. When Ludwig has finished eating, he can't stand the silence any longer and says goodbye to the two of them under some pretext. Gianna and David are left alone at the table. They look into each other's eyes for a long time again. This time it is Gianna who whispers softly to David:

*»Can we talk outside for a minute?«*

David nods. For the second time that day, they leave the convent complex and walk a bit through the narrow streets of the old town. When Gianna is sure that no one can hear them anymore, she says quietly to David:

*»Do you think we can manage to get across the great domain border together?«*

*»Of course we can do it!« David answers with conviction.*

*»I've been thinking back and forth for a long time. I think now I know what I want. I want to get away from here and start a whole new life in the north, beyond the Alps. Will you help me with that?«*

*»Of course I'll help you!« David says with tears in his eyes. »Did you really think I was just going to leave you here like this?«*

Then he takes Gianna in his arms and hugs her tightly.

## **Pension insurance**

*»Mom! What are you doing here?«*

Jan is pleasantly surprised when one evening his mother shows up at the door with two large shopping bags.

*»Hello Jan! I was here in Cologne today and thought I might drop in on you. My train home doesn't leave for another two hours. I hope I'm not disturbing you!«*

*»Not at all. Come on in. We're sitting down to dinner right now, but you're welcome to join us.«*

He helps his mother out of her coat and leads her to the kitchen.

*»I don't think you know Heike and Franzi yet! Heike - Franzi - my mother.«*

The two young women get up from their chairs and shake hands with Mrs. Eckert.

*»I really didn't mean to interrupt your meal!«*

*»That doesn't matter!« replies Franzi. »It's nice that we're finally getting to know each other.«*

*»Yes, I think so, too. The last few times I visited my son, you were not at home.«*

Franziska and Heike have been living in the shared apartment with Jan and Kevin for almost two years now. The four of them get along well and

sometimes do things together in their free time. When they have free time. Franziska works as a branch manager at the Cologne savings bank and Heike is a marketing manager at a medium-sized company. Both often work late into the night, just like their male roommates.

*»How time flies!« moans Elvira Eckert. »I can still remember when Patrick and Elena still lived here. How are those two doing? Are you still in touch?«*

*»Kevin and I visit them from time to time,« Jan replies. »They're both doing great. Little Isabella can already walk by now!«*

Elvira Eckert wistfully wonders when she will have a grandchild. She has come to terms with her son's homosexuality. All her hopes are now pinned solely on her daughter Anna. But she changes her love affairs as often as other people change their underwear. She seems to have no interest in a steady relationship, and planning her own family is apparently the last thing on her list of priorities.

*»Please give them, or rather the three of them, my very best regards the next time you see them!«*

*»Will do, Mom.«*

*»When you see the little kids growing up, you realize how fast you're getting old yourself,« Jan's mother sighs. »Before you know it, you've reached retirement age. Although - come to think of it - who knows if I'll ever live to see retirement!«*

*»Mom, what's wrong?«, Jan asks, visibly startled. »Are you not feeling well? Are you sick?«*

*»No, no - I'm fine! I just mean that people are being allowed to retire later and later. If this continues, hardly anyone will reach retirement age! I'm not the youngest anymore, but I still can't think about retirement for a long time. The government has now raised the retirement age to over seventy. That is nevertheless a giant mess!«*

»Mom, you know that the pension funds are empty. How are you supposed to pay the pensions of all those retirees?«

»Well listen boy, after all we have paid into the pension fund all our lives!«

»That's correct for sure, Mom. But unfortunately, the money is gone. We're all starting from scratch again. I know it's unfair. But there's no way out. Everything that is paid out in pension must be paid in by the working population as a pension contribution.«

»And this pension contribution now already accounts for a quarter of gross wages,« agrees Franzi. »People simply can't be expected to pay any more. It's really tragic that the economic crash has coincided with this critical phase of demographic change.«

»Well,« Heike reflects aloud, »there are many people who claim that this was no coincidence, but that the retirement of the baby boomer generation brought down the financial house of cards. When so many people wanted to draw on their retirement savings in one fell swoop, it quickly became clear that the alleged billions existed only on paper and were not backed by any equivalent value.«

»I certainly feel cheated by the politicians,« grumbles Jan's mother. »For years, we were always told that our pensions were safe. Then, in addition to our normal pension contributions, we were also supposed to save for our retirement and pay into a private pension plan. And we did all of that. And now they say: »All right, it was all for nothing - let's go back to the pay-as-you-go system! Although everyone knows that this is hardly feasible in the future with this ratio of payers and recipients.«

»Unfortunately, there is no alternative,« sighs Heike. »If we were to set up a funded pension system, the burden on the working population would be even greater. There's no way around this system if you don't want the old folks to starve.«

»After all, couldn't pension payouts be increased by borrowing? After all, we were made the most fantastic promises before the

*crash. Politicians had promised us a pension at 63 and there was even supposed to be a maternity pension!«*

*»Mom, you know where all this has led to in the end. You can't keep spending more than you have. You will certainly not find a lender today who is willing to sink his money into the wallets of old dodderers.«*

*»Our pension system was one big scam even before the crash!« Franzl exclaims. »My father was ranting about this lying system long before the economic collapse. The Riester<sup>19</sup> pension, he said, had only been invented by the financial corporations to sell their overpriced financial products to the people. The state subsidy, which we paid for out of our tax money, has ended up back with the financial industry through commissions and administrative costs. Instead of going to the contributors!«*

*»You just shouldn't have relied so much on the state,« Jan says, »but should have relied more on a company pension plan.«*

*»Tell that to my father!« Franzl laughs. »He can get so upset on this subject that my mother always thinks he's going to have a heart attack.«*

*»Why? Your father worked for a large industrial group. Surely they had an exemplary company pension plan there.«*

*»Think! Shall I tell you how it went with him? When things weren't going so well at his company sector, they sold the whole business. The employees made a so-called transfer of operations and kept all their company pension entitlements. The buyer even made a contractual commitment to regularly increase the capital stock for the company pensions so that the promised company pension would actually be available when the employees actually retired. The seller paid the buyer well for this commitment. However, he paid in nothing to the fund at all! Instead, the employees were sold on and on like any other commodity. One transfer followed the next, and each time the acquiring companies became smaller and more dubious. Until the last buyer in the long line finally filed for insolvency and the entire*

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19 Riester pension: Subsidized, basically privately financed pension in Germany

*pension entitlements ended up in the large pot of creditor claims. The largest creditor was the Pensions-Sicherungs-Verein<sup>20</sup>, which in the end had to answer for the grandiose pension promises of the large corporation.«*

*»Elegantly pulled out of the responsibility!« Jan comments sarcastically. »Or, as the saying goes, the losses were socialized, i.e. passed on to the general public. But the takeover by the PSV was also invalidated at the latest with the big crash, when all investment forms and pension commitments vanished into thin air overnight.«*

*»That's the only comforting thing about all this misery, my father always says. That there were only losers. No matter how one had built up one's old-age provision - today all pensioners are dependent on the meager payouts from the pay-as-you-go system. Or live off the allowances of their children, if they have any. My parents have to turn over every penny twice. And if my old father didn't still have his part-time job, they would be completely dependent on my support.«*

*»Oh, children,« says Elvira Eckert. »Aren't there any nicer topics than retirement? How's your work at the university going, Jan?«*

The young people are glad to finally be able to put this tiresome pension issue to rest. The further conversation at the kitchen table is more concerned with the present than with the sad past. Jan reports on his seminar, which he is currently preparing. His mother talks about her work at the supermarket and about Jan's sister, who has meanwhile finished her training at the city administration and is about to make a career in the public administration of the small town. Time flies as the four of them talk animatedly about God and the world. Only by chance does Jan look at his watch in time for his mother to catch the last train home.

## **Bus trip**

*There's so many different worlds  
So many different suns*

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<sup>20</sup> The Pensions-Sicherungs-Verein (PSV) is a German insurance association whose operating purpose is to secure the legally vested pension rights.

*And we have just one world  
But we live in different ones* <sup>21</sup>

Gianna and David had not slept as badly as they did that night for a long time. Ten men were snoring in David's dorm room. The loudest sawing noises came from the corner where Ludwig, the Bavarian, lay in his sleeping bag. In Gianna's dormitory it was much quieter. However, Gianna had far too many thoughts running through her head to be able to fall asleep over them. She had made an important decision: she would seek her fortune far away. She had often toyed with this thought. Actually, since her school days. Or more precisely, since she had realized how differently the term "prosperity" is defined on this earth. Among her classmates, there was hardly anyone who hadn't at one time or another snobbishly proclaimed:

*»When I grow up, I'm going to migrate north!«*

None of them had put it into practice. Words and deeds - how far apart they usually are. How far apart are people? THEM in the north and WE in the south. Two separate worlds that could not be more different.

»Quasi Sutrium ire - Like going to Sutri« was already said by the ancient Romans when someone did something quickly and thoroughly. The phrase recalled the Roman general Marcus Furius Camillus' coup d'état-like capture of the city of Sutri in 386 BC. Gianna had also gone to Sutri. And she, too, had made a decision in the hand coup. It was now or never. Should she fail, at least she had tried.

At half past six the bell rings for breakfast and half an hour later Gianna and David are ready to leave the monastery. Their wet clothes from yesterday are not quite dry yet. What the heck? Then they will just hang them up again in the evening - wherever they will be. At the monastery gate they give a donation to the sister as thanks for the bed and the food. It is the same Sister as when they arrived - Sister Mary. She thanks them kindly and wishes them a good journey. At Porta Vecchia, Gianna and David leave the old town and go in search of the bus stop. They don't have

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21 Dire Straits: Brothers in Arms

to look for long, when they see the sign »Fermata« and the company logo of Francigena Tours.

According to the timetable, the bus should arrive here in fifteen minutes. After Gianna's experience with Mediterranean punctuality, however, they both rather do not expect a regular departure.

*»How far should we actually drive?« asks Gianna.*

*»I would say to just before the border of the Po domain,« David suggests. »According to our map, the watershed is at the top of the Cisa Pass. The last stop before that is at Pontremoli. Let's get off there and stay a few days. There we can get an idea of how and where to cross the border most easily.«*

*»Won't that make us suspicious?« Gianna asks skeptically.*

*»You mean because we leave the bus just before crossing the border? Yes, you're right. Then the driver probably suspects from the start that we're up to something illegal!«*

*»Exactly! Maybe the passengers will also get something and in the end someone will rat us out at a control!«*

*»Of course, we can pay for the whole trip to Piacenza and then still get off in Pontremoli. After all, no one can forbid us to leave the bus early and let the rest of the ticket expire!«*

*»But then we pay much more than we should!« Gianna complains.*

*»It won't make that much difference. From the border it's not far to Piacenza and the roads are in excellent condition from there on. The fare is definitely calculated according to the duration of the trip and not so much according to the distance.«*

*»All right, let's do it that way,« Gianna finally agrees to David's suggestion with a heavy heart.*

The two have come to an agreement surprisingly quickly. If everything works out, they will be close to the border this evening! Now the bus just



has to come - but it doesn't. Half an hour passes. An hour passes. One and a half hours pass. No bus is arriving. Finally - almost two hours late - a rolling monster appears at the end of the street, trailing a thick black cloud of soot. Just before the bus reaches the stop, the driver sounds a fanfare horn. It sounds so loud that Gianna and David first flinch and then reflexively cover their ears. When the bus comes to a halt next to them, the driver turns off the hammering diesel engine. The air brake makes a hissing sound. Then, finally, there is silence. A few passengers leave the bus. The driver opens the luggage compartment on the side and takes the corresponding backpacks out of the belly of the monster.

*»Did you see that?« Gianna whispers in David's ear. »We can't take the backpacks on the bus. I hope it works out with us getting off early!«*

Gianna's concern, however, proves to be unnecessary. When the driver asks them how far they want to go and Gianna tells him that they want to go all the way to Piacenza, he can't help laughing out loud.

*»See you in Piacenza! You are two beautiful pilgrims to me! This is totally impossible. In Siena a large group of pilgrims is getting on, and they reserved their seats weeks ago. If you want, I can take you all the way there. But at the latest in Siena you have to get off again!«*

After Gianna has translated the bad news to David, the two look at each other somewhat perplexed. David takes the map out of his backpack and first wants to see where this Siena is.

*»Here! That's it!«, Gianna says, pointing to the small dot on the map. »That's just halfway to the border!«*

The bus driver is getting impatient:

*»You must decide now! We're already late enough!«*

Gianna and David look at each other briefly and then nod their heads. In any case, half the way is better than nothing. They just drive to Siena and then see what happens there. Gianna asks the driver for the fare and with

trembling hands pays the requested amount. Salvatore and she had had to work hard for several weeks for this money. And now she uses it to pay for two bus tickets. Before they let the driver stow their backpacks, they take the two passes out of the lid compartments. Then they climb the high steps into the passenger compartment and look for a free seat. Thank God, there is a free bench quite far back, so that they can at least sit together during the long ride. Snorting, the bus starts moving again. Apart from Gianna and David, no other pilgrims got on in Sutri.

The bus rolls slowly and swayingly along the old Via Cassia. Again and again, it has to drive behind horse-drawn vehicles for several minutes before it has a chance to overtake. Potholes and broken road surfaces form further obstacles that make fast progress impossible. Nevertheless, Gianna and David enjoy the ride. They no longer have to walk. They sit comfortably on the upholstered seats of a coach, albeit badly battered, and can simply let the landscape pass them by. Oak and chestnut forests alternate with hazelnut plantations and olive groves.

After a few kilometers they abruptly reach the end of the Tiber domain. On a small hill is the invisible watershed that separates the basin of the Tiber from that of the Marta. The bus stops at a roadblock. The driver opens the door and an armed policeman gets on the bus. He asks all the passengers to show their IDs. Gianna and David get nervous. This is the first real ID check they are going to get into. The policeman, however, only takes a few glances at the identification documents, which are willingly held out to him by the passengers. When he sees David and Gianna's passports, however, his facial expression changes abruptly. He takes the documents in his hand and obviously doesn't know what to make of them. Gianna explains to him that they are replacement documents from the Vatican and that unfortunately their original IDs were stolen in Rome. The policeman scratches his head. But then he gives them back their documents and checks the rest of the passengers. As he leaves the bus again, David sees the driver inconspicuously slip him a few bills. Shortly afterwards, the barrier opens and the journey can continue.

A woman sitting across the aisle says to Gianna:

*»So what's going on again today! First this raid on the departure in Rome and now again such a control!«*

*»Why, what was going on in Rome?« Gianna asks back curiously.*

*»The bus station was swarming with these Swiss guards from the Vatican this morning. They checked all the passengers. That's why the departure was delayed so long. Now we are already two hours late!«*

*»What were they looking for?«*

*»No idea! They had photos with them and examined every passenger intensively and compared them with the photos! That lasted endlessly until we were finally allowed to drive off. But that was not all! Also on the road we were controlled still twice. And now here again!«*

Now the man sitting next to the woman joins in the conversation:

*»So this was just the normal control at the domain border. We will see this several times today. But that doesn't mean anything else. Just normal bureaucracy. But what they did today in Rome was indeed extraordinary! Probably they are looking for a criminal and want to prevent him from mingling with the pilgrims and leaving the city.«*

Gianna's heart slips into her pants. She is sure that the search was for both of them. After the Vatican had even placed their photos on the front page of the newspapers, it could be assumed that the Swiss guardsmen had controlled the buses on the basis of these photos. Apparently they were still being feverishly sought in Rome. When the bus driver takes a short bathroom break in Viterbo and the passengers can stretch their feet a bit, Gianna tells David the news.

*»Do you really think they have us on the wanted list?« he asks incredulously.*

*»Of course!« Gianna assures him. »Someone in the Vatican seems to want to prevent our knowledge from getting out to the public. They're trying to silence us by any means necessary!«*

*»Then it was definitely the right thing for us to have left in time. If we had already taken the pilgrim bus from Rome, they would have caught us for sure. I just hope we don't get caught in another check!«*

*»The man next to us said we're going to be inspected at several domain boundaries later today. But I don't think it's going to be that critical. After all, the Vatican's power is very much limited to the city of Rome. They can't do much in the rural areas. At least that's what I hope!«*

Nevertheless, Gianna and David board the bus with an uneasy feeling when the driver gives the signal to continue. The rocking continues. Shortly before they reach the town of Bolsena, however, they are struck by a real fright. The lake that suddenly appears in front of them looks like Lake Bracciano! Did the bus driver turn around? Has he become suspicious? Does he want to take them back to Rome and hand them over to their henchmen to collect the reward? But a glance at the map immediately calms them down. Lake Bolsena, named after the city, really does resemble Lake Bracciano in many ways. Size, shape and history of its formation: everything is exactly the same as its counterpart further south.

It has become quite hot outside by now. Of course, there is no air conditioning in this rolling museum piece. Instead, you can open the upper windows. A pleasant warm breeze blows through the bus, cooling the sweating bodies a little. David thinks wistfully of the dry air conditioning in his server rooms, which he has cursed so often during his work. Gianna, on the other hand, feels the cooling air current blowing around her nose as a tremendous luxury. She had never experienced air conditioning in her entire life. No Roman can afford such a thing. And the city's ailing power grid could not provide the necessary energy for several such devices.

In Acquapendente, the bus is besieged by street vendors. Gianna buys some fruit, bread and nuts as provisions for the rest of the trip. To her astonishment, she can still pay with Roman lire without any problems. The vendors accept every regional currency that exists between Rome and Florence. Only with the change they seem to have a little difficulty. In any case, Gianna continues the trip with some bills she has never seen before in her life.

After a short lunch break, they continue on their way. Soon they have to stop again at a roadblock and show their passes. But this time everything goes smoothly. Relieved and with full stomachs, Gianna and David tilt the back of their bench seat back as far as possible and take a midday nap. Meanwhile, outside, the Tuscan landscape has turned into a blazing oven. Despite the rocking - or perhaps because of it - they sleep soundly and in this way catch up on the sleep that had eluded them the previous night. When they wake up again, the greatest midday heat is over and the bus is just reaching Torrenieri in the sub-domain of Asso.Orcia.Ombrone. A glance at the map shows them that it can't be far to Siena. The remaining drive reminds David of the background scenery of one of his video games. As if in a perfect virtual reality, the Tuscan picture book landscape passes by the window. Cypress avenues, pine forests, lonely farmsteads and picturesque little towns amidst an infinitely wide hilly landscape. The sun is already low in the west and bathes this magnificent spectacle in an increasingly reddish light. In the floodplains, storks wade through the marshes in search of frogs and other edible creatures. High in the air, birds of prey circle in the updrafts of the mountain slopes, using the remaining thermals of the day in their search for food for their young.

Just before the sun finally disappears, David sees a large city appear on the horizon. The earth-colored houses and roofs virtually merge with the surrounding landscape. Only the dome and the bell tower of the cathedral stand out strikingly from the brown sea of houses. The closer you get to the center, the denser the traffic becomes. Horse-drawn and donkey-drawn vehicles are in the majority here, as they are everywhere in the flat

countryside, but a few motorized tricycles and a few motor scooters also mingle with the road users. The bus driver honks loudly as he makes his way into the city center. He reaches his stop at Piazza Mercato. Gianna and David leave the bus and have their backpacks taken from the luggage compartment. They have reached their destination for today. Everything has gone well. Now they just need a hostel for the night.

## Caliphate

*»You want to visit the Caliph of Baghdad?«*

Kevin's mouth remains open when Jan announces the news in the shared flat. His doctoral studies at the Department of Domain Economics are slowly coming to an end and Jan is already hard at work on his dissertation<sup>22</sup>. In it, he deals with the "Occurrence of Ethnic Conflicts in the Reestablishment of Watershed-Based Domains".

*»Not the caliph himself! Our chair has been in contact with the universities in Baghdad and Diyarbakir for a long time. Last year we had some exchange students here in Cologne. The Muslims now obviously feel in our debt and have sent us an invitation for a one-week study visit. Professor Guggenmoser is taking a few of his doctoral students along for this, and because the visit program fits ideally with my doctoral work, I get to go along!«*

*»I don't know if I wanted to go there,« Heike muses. »After all the terrible things that have happened there in recent years!«*

In fact, such drastic changes had taken place in the Middle East in recent years that the upheavals in northern Europe look harmless by comparison. With the collapse of the world economy, the American occupying power disappeared head over heels from Iraq, leaving a disastrous power vacuum throughout the region. Conflicts between opposing ethnic groups and religions literally exploded, triggering a never-ending spiral of death and destruction throughout the Arab world. Only after years of constant bloodshed did a new leader emerge who finally succeeded in pacifying the

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22 Dissertation: Scientific work for the attainment of a doctoral degree at a university.

war-weary peoples and establishing a new great power at the Persian Gulf. Mustafa Al-Raschid managed the feat of bringing the religious leaders of the Sunnis and Shiites together with the Kurdish leaders from the north to the negotiating table and founded a new state in Mesopotamia. The dispute over the new state borders was conducted bitterly and with irreconcilable harshness. For a long time, it looked as if these peace efforts were also doomed to failure. Until, in a coup, Al-Raschid succeeded in convincing the religious leaders and the secular stakeholders of his idea of a caliphate. The role of the caliph was to tie in with the age-old traditions that in earlier times had helped the land on the Euphrates and Tigris to boundless power and fabulous prosperity. In Western countries, of course, memories of the unspeakable Islamic State, whose murdering hordes had plunged the entire region into deepest chaos only a few years earlier, were immediately awakened. At least, that was the image conveyed by the Western media, although it turned out in retrospect that the reporting had not always been entirely unbiased and journalistically correct.

In any case, Mustafa Al-Raschid's definition of the state was as simple as it was ingenious. Together with the religious leaders, he succeeded in justifying the borders of his caliphate with the Koran and tracing them back to the will of Allah. Thus he could already be sure of the support of the clergy. His other considerations were based on another conflict that had already escalated massively in the region: the struggle over vital water. With its dam projects in southeastern Anatolia, Turkey had created a situation that could hardly be controlled by peaceful means. With their huge dams, the Turks had cut off the water supply to the Syrians and Iraqis. The Atatürk Dam alone held back the water of the Euphrates over an area that clearly exceeded that of Lake Constance. And the height of the dam, in direct comparison, even surpassed the spires of Cologne Cathedral. But this mammoth dam was only the prelude to a much more extensive plan. A total of 22 barrages would have been built on Turkish soil in the final stage of the ambitious GAP<sup>23</sup> project. The consequences

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23 GAP: Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi

were easy to imagine for the people living downstream, who already had too little water to live on.

The lofty Turkish dam plans were, however, abruptly destroyed when the economic crisis also hit Turkey and caused its military superiority in eastern Anatolia to collapse. Now the time of the Turkish Kurds had come. They had felt oppressed for years and now seized the opportunity to finally declare themselves autonomous. As guardians of the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, the Kurds were courted by Mustafa Al-Raschid in the most obliging manner and lured with extensive autonomy and many privileges.

After that, nothing stood in the way of the proclamation of the caliphate. Mustafa Al-Raschid declared himself caliph of the domain of Shatt al-Arab and thus ruler over the entire catchment area of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The borders of his state were not arbitrarily determined by human hands, but were based solely on the valleys and mountains of the Armenian Highlands, created by Allah in his infinite wisdom.

*»The Shatt al-Arab domain is absolutely safe today!« Jan reassures his worried housemates. »The troubled times there are long gone. Free access to the Persian Gulf and the oil fields around the city of Basra guarantee enormous revenues from the export of crude oil. The fertile plain between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers was known as the Garden of Eden even in biblical times, and today it easily feeds the population of the entire domain. And since the Shiites and Sunnis have submitted to the authority of the Caliph of Baghdad, there is once again a lot of sunshine between the formerly hostile religious groups. Today, the Shatt al-Arab domain serves worldwide as a model of successful reconstruction.«*

*»Weren't there even wars fought over water there?« Kevin asks skeptically.*

*»Yes, once upon a time. But that is long in the past! The problem has been solved by the fact that the domain includes the entire river system of the Shatt al-Arab. It is simply physically*



*impossible for one river domain to steal water from another. Boundary demarcation along natural watersheds offers invaluable advantages, especially in water-scarce regions of the world. One can easily plan dams and thus secure the power and water supply for the population. Nevertheless, every dam project always affects only one's own territory and never other states in the lower reaches of the rivers.«*

*»Could it be that the Caliph of Baghdad was inspired by your Professor Guggenmoser?« Franzl asks with an innocent smile.*

Jan grins broadly at her and then answers:

*»I guess that can't be completely dismissed. Or why do you think we maintain such good relations with the shattis at our department?«*

## **Siena**

Three times the bus had sounded its fanfare in Piazza Mercato. Little by little, the participants of the pilgrimage group came rushing from the alleys of the old town. Some had already given up hope that the bus would come at all today. And the little bar at the Piazza del Campo was too inviting and the cappuccino too good and too cheap for anyone to want to spend their waiting time on the unadorned traffic circle behind the Palazzo Pubblico. Eventually, however, the tour guide had gathered all his flock around him and the trip could continue.

David and Gianna are left alone in the large, deserted square. They feel as if they have been spat out, in a backyard. At the southern end of the piazza, the city ends abruptly. Here begin the dry fields where the townspeople try to grow a little fruit and vegetables for their own use. The dilapidated houses that frame the square in a horseshoe shape have all seen better days. At the northern end stands the bulky rear end of the Palazzo Pubblico and to its right the broken stump of the town's former landmark. The Torre del Mangia was once over a hundred meters high and had towered over Siena like a lighthouse. A few years ago, it had collapsed in an earthquake.

And God knows, the Sienese had more important things to do than rebuild old towers.

David catches sight of a signpost to the Via Francigena. In Siena, too, the medieval pilgrimage route leads right through the heart of the ancient city. After a few meters, they reach the huge Piazza del Campo. Where tourists used to occupy the huge area by the thousands, a horse racing track has now taken over. And because the Palio events are the only diversion in the dreary daily routine of the impoverished city population, they are now held on the first Sunday of every month.

Gianna and David follow the signs with the hiking stick. On one of the houses Gianna can decipher a street name: Via Banchi di Sopra. She asks an oncoming young man if he knows where the nearest pilgrim hostel is.

*»If you turn right up ahead, you'll come to the Franciscan monastery at the Basilica di San Francesco. They offer pilgrims like you shelter for the night. If you want it even easier, there's a private hostel just up ahead in the ruins of Palazzo Salimbeni. I don't know if I'd dare go in there though!«*

*»Grazie mille!« Gianna thanks the young man. Then she turns to David: »Please, not to the monastery again! I'm still fed up with this religious hoopla! Besides, the friars will only take us in for one night. Do you already have a plan for tomorrow?«*

David doesn't really care where they spend tonight. The main thing is that they have a roof over their heads and a reasonably comfortable mattress to lie on.

*»No, I don't have a plan yet,« he replies.*

*»Too bad! I always thought you Germans don't even go to the toilet without a plan!«*

*»I am not a German, if I may remind you! In my veins, unlike yours, not a single drop of German blood flows!«*

*»You're right!« Gianna apologizes.*

They continue walking for about a hundred meters and reach the small Piazza Salimbeni. The building at the end of the square must be the old dilapidated palazzo that the young man had spoken of.

*»This is supposed to have been a palazzo? It looks more like a bomb has hit it!« David says skeptically. »Look at the sculpture in the middle of the square! The massive marble base looks like it's been there for several hundred years. But the female figure up there, that looks more like contemporary art. It doesn't go together!«*

*»Do you know who that is?« Gianna suddenly shouts excitedly. »That's Gianna Nannini! My parents were totally into her music when they were teenagers! When I was born, they gave me her name! She's my namesake. And not some strange therapy refusenik from snobby Milan! Look, it's also written on the pedestal: Gianna Nannini - musician and honorary citizen of the city of Siena - 1956 to 20\_\_\_. Too bad! Unfortunately, the last two numbers are hard to decipher!«*

David can't understand her excitement. He doesn't have much to do with Italian oldies from the last millennium, and he's never heard of a Gianna Nannini. He is more interested in this mysterious ruin at the end of the square. He walks a little closer to the massive arched gate that houses the entrance to the inn. Above the gate there is indeed a sign on which is written "Albergo Francesco". Due to the falling darkness, however, it is hardly recognizable. But what does it say under the sign? Carved into the marble pointed arch: "Monte dei Paschi".

*»Gianna!« he calls out. »Look here! This palace must have once been the headquarters of Banca Monte dei Paschi! This bank was instrumental in the collapse of the global economic system!«*

*»What do you mean?« Gianna asks uncomprehendingly.*

*»I told you I write software for banks.«*

*»So what? You know I have no idea about such things!«*

*»In this context, you sometimes look a little beyond your own nose. I mean, what's going on there in the banking industry and what used to go wrong there before the crash.«*

*»So – and what went wrong there?«*

*»Very much - but that would take us too far now. What I want to say is simply this: Banca Monte dei Paschi was once considered the oldest bank in the world. It had something like the status of a national shrine in Italy. When it was actually bankrupt, however, politicians wanted to keep it alive at all costs and kept granting new government loans. Today, this bank is regarded worldwide as a cautionary symbol of unrestrained debt-making just before the global economic catastrophe. No wonder the population has vented its frustration at this building!«*

Gianna doesn't have the nerve for David's banking stories right now.

*»Let's go inside,« she says. »If you ask me, this looks pretty uninhabited!«*

They step through the open gate and find themselves in a large entrance hall. On a wooden counter is a lit candle and a small bell. Next to it is a sign saying »Please ring!«. Gianna takes the bell and rings it. They wait and listen, but nothing happens. After a minute, Gianna rings again. This time, however, much longer and more forcefully. Noises can now be heard from an adjoining room. Someone clears his throat and spits out loudly.

*»Yes yes, I'm coming!«*

A man, with a candle in his hand, comes out of the room behind the counter. He must be about fifty years old and looks very unkempt.

*»What can I do for you?«*

*»We are pilgrims and we are looking for a place to stay,« Gianna replies. »We'll probably stay two nights. But we don't know that for sure yet. Can we pay with Roman lire?«*

*»Not really!« the host replies. »For tonight it's okay. But tomorrow you go to the money changer and get some Ombronian lire! There's an exchange office in Piazza del Campo.«*

The money he wants for one night is about the same as what they had given as a donation in Sutri. There, however, they had also been fed. This ruin, however, does not at all look as if one would get something to eat here. Gianna nevertheless accepts the price and pays for the first night.

*»Well then, follow me!« says the host and goes ahead with his candle.*

He leads them to a monumental stairway and points upward.

*»Just stay away from the upper floors! Everything up there is in danger of collapsing!«*

Instead, he leads Gianna and David down a narrow staircase to the basement. When they reach the bottom, he leads them down a long dark corridor to a hall that is provisionally lit by a few oil lamps.

*»Here is the dormitory. It's seen better days. This used to be the vault of a bank. But you won't find any gold bars here anymore! Toilet and washroom are at the end of the hall. At the moment, there are only two other guests here besides you. Hey Vito! Hey Stella! Say good evening to your new roommates!«*

The young couple addressed sits lonely at a large table located in the center of the vault. The two look up briefly, say »Buonasera« and then lapse back into their previous rigidity. The table and ten chairs are the only furnishings in the room. There are no real beds. Instead, there are about twenty mattresses spread irregularly on the floor. Gianna and David opt for the two mattresses in the corner to the right of the entrance. They spread out their sleeping bags and take yesterday's damp rain gear out of their backpacks.

*»Can we have some of the chairs?« Gianna asks the couple.*

*»Take as much as you want,« replies the young woman named Stella.*

Gianna gets four of the chairs and forms them in a semicircle around their camp. The she and David hang their damp clothes over the backrests.

*»Do you think anything will dry in this cellar hole?« David asks with a doubtful look.*

*»Probably not, but at least we have some privacy through this curtain.«*

Gianna doesn't quite know what to make of the two roommates and tries to start a conversation:

*»Are you pilgrims?«*

*»No,« Stella answers without looking at her.*

*»How long have you been in Siena?«*

*»About a week.«*

*»You sound like you're from southern Italy! Am I wrong?«*

*»No, you're right. My husband and I are from Sicily.«*

*»Sicily? My God! What brought you to Siena? I'm from Rome, by the way.«*

*»But your husband is not a Roman! Do you speak German with him?«*

*»We're not married,« Gianna replies. »Just friends. And yes, you're right. David doesn't speak a word of Italian, only German, English and some Arabic.«*

*»You're not pilgrims either, are you?« Stella asks, slowly thawing.*

*»Hmm, no. Not really either! We want to head north across the border. But we don't really know where yet.«*

*»Do you have valid papers?«*

*»Well, we have passes from the Vatican. But they're - uh - not quite in order.«*

*»Then you can forget it! Better turn around right now and go back to Rome!«*

*»We can't. My boyfriend and I had - uh - some problems there,«  
Gianna is beating around the bush.*

*»Problems? You do not have problems. WE have problems!«*

*»Why, what happened? Why shouldn't we get across the border?«*

*»Vito and I have tried. It's impossible! If only we had stayed at home in Sicily!«*

*»Where did you try to cross the border?«*

Stella looks at Gianna and David calmly for a while. Then she tells what had happened to her and Vito in the last weeks:

*»A month ago we had the opportunity to travel from Palermo to La Spezia on a freighter. Vito's brother knows a relative of the captain and he arranged the passage for us. Almost all of our savings went to pay for it. In La Spezia we found out that the pilgrimage route passes nearby. So we joined the pilgrims and walked up the Via Francigena. At the Cisa Pass near Pontremoli we wanted to cross the border to the Po domain. There is one of the few official border crossings. We thought at first that we could somehow slip through in the stream of pilgrims. But that quickly turned out to be an illusion. The border station, up there on the pass, is a high security facility. Everyone who comes from the south and wants to cross the border is checked for identity in the customs building. Vehicles are checked with dogs and screened with electronic devices. From our hiding place in the forest, we soon realized that there is no way through without valid travel documents. Good - we thought - then we just go around. For a whole day we walked along the metal fence in the forest. Always at a safe distance, so that we could not be seen from the other side. Completely insurmountable I tell you! Uphill and downhill we ran. The fence always runs along the top of the ridge. This used to be the green border between Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. Now it's an iron curtain. Over five meters high, with a razor-sharp barbed wire entanglement at the top. When evening*

came, we found a tree uprooted by the wind near the fence. With our combined efforts, we heaved it inch by inch against the fence. Finally, we managed to lean it against the fence so that we could climb up. Don't ask how we looked after we climbed over the barbed wire at the top! It almost pulled the skin off our bodies. We bled like stuck pigs. As soon as we were over there, the lights went on at the fence and an alarm siren howled. After a minute, one of those automatic flying things, a drone or whatever those things are called, appeared. A voice came out of a loudspeaker telling us to stay put. We ran away as fast as we could, but that drone thing always stayed right above us. We tried to get it out of the sky with branches and rocks, but it was too far up in the air. For an hour we ran through the forest in a panic, trying to shake the stupid thing off. To no avail. Then we heard the dogs. Four carabinieri finally arrested us and took us to a reception center in Berceto in one of those modern SUVs.«

»Oh my God!« Gianna whispers in horror. »I never thought they'd shield themselves that way from their own countrymen!«

»First and foremost, it is the many Africans against whom they want to separate themselves with this metal fence. Vito and I worked in a hospital in Palermo. You can't imagine how many people are still crossing the Mediterranean and heading north!«

»I understand that with the Africans. But we - we are one people! We speak the same language on both sides of the fence. They can't treat us like criminals!« Gianna is outraged.

»You have no idea what they can do! At first they assumed that we were drug smugglers. When they didn't find anything in our belongings, we had to go for a medical examination. We had to strip naked, get on a table and squat bent over in front. Then a doctor checked us for drug packets that had been slipped in. You can't imagine how humiliating that was! Then it was on to the interrogation. An officer wanted to know from us where we came from, where we wanted to go, why we left our homeland and so on. He also asked us if we wanted to apply for asylum. In the same breath, however, he also said that we came from a safe region of origin and had no chance of success. After the



*interrogation, they photographed us, scanned our fingerprints and took a DNA sample. After that, we spent three days in custody pending deportation.«*

*»Did they at least treat you decently there?« Gianna asks, increasingly dismayed.*

*»Oh yes! We got good food and had a clean double cell. Washbasin, a modern toilet. Nothing was lacking. This whole process seems to be perfectly organized at all. On the fourth day we were given the deportation notice. We were classified as economic refugees and had to leave the domain immediately. That same evening, the Carabinieri drove us back up the Cisa Pass in an all-terrain vehicle. They handcuffed Vito and me to the rear emergency seats. Vito couldn't take the many curves of the pass road and threw up during the drive. Shortly after the border they stopped and wanted to kick us out. When they saw that Vito had soiled their car, they went berserk. They beat him up and insulted him in the worst way. Then they left him chained in the car. They grabbed me and dragged me into the forest. And there - there they all - one after the other -«*

Stella can tell no more. Shaken by crying fits, she hides her face in her hands. Gianna takes her in her arms and tries to comfort her. David sits next to her, irritated. He hadn't understood a word of Stella's story and at some point had stopped listening. Her sudden outburst of emotion surprises him like a bolt from the blue. Now Vito opens his mouth for the first time that evening:

*»I said from the beginning that we wouldn't make it without a professional escape agent! But you wouldn't listen to me!«*

*»Oh really?« Stella screams at him, howling. »Where were we supposed to get the money from? You know as well as I do that our money wouldn't have been enough for an escape agent! We just made it to Siena on the way back. But now everything is used up and we are sitting here in this hole and don't know how to go on! The landlord has already said that he will kick us out*

*tomorrow if we don't give him the money for the previous night. But we have nothing left at all!«*

*»So you want to go back to Sicily,« Gianna says. »Can't you work here for a while to earn some money for the trip home?«*

*»Do you know what a passage by ship costs? And by land we'll be on the road for months! How are we supposed to get the money together here? Francesco told us that his brother-in-law runs a brothel, which runs quite well due to the many pilgrims passing through. I should introduce myself there, he said!«*

*»If he does that again, I'll kill him!« Vito rages. »I swear on my mother's grave!«*

*»Don't get so upset, Vito!« Stella tries to calm her husband down. »You're already acting as if I had accepted his offer. But we have to live on something in the future!«*

Gianna notices that David is looking at her rather helplessly. Obviously, he would also like to know what the three of them are talking about so emotionally in Italian.

*»Come with me!« she prompts him. »We'll sit down on the mattresses in our corner. There I'll calmly tell you what they've been through.«*

She apologizes to Stella and Vito and retreats with David to her sleeping corner. In great detail, she repeats Stella's story. When she has finished, David says:

*»I didn't think it would get so complicated at the border. But so be it. Tomorrow we'll try to get in touch with a smuggling organization. Where there's a demand, there's bound to be someone offering an appropriate service. Believe me! If we contact the right people, we will get across this shitty border!«*

*»You mean we should contact an escape agent?« Gianna asks, irritated.*

*»Escape agent, smuggler, call it what you want! In any case, what we need now is a professional and not an amateur!«*

## **Manhunt**

At the Vatican, Monsignor Scarelli has summoned his private secretary to his private chambers for a report.

*»Bonelli, what is the current state of affairs? Have they finally apprehended this spy from Vienna?«*

*»I'm sorry Monsignor, the manhunt for him is in full swing. So far, unfortunately, without success. The young man has disappeared off the face of the earth!«*

*»You've got to be kidding! He is wanted in all the newspapers of the city. His poster hangs on every lamppost! Someone must have seen him!«*

*»We have had some initial success. Yesterday, three men contacted us. They claimed to have recognized the man on the wanted poster. When they tried to confront him, he ran away. They then chased him and overpowered him. When he resisted, they hit him over the skull, whereupon he lost consciousness. They then took his papers and left to get the police. Shortly thereafter, however, they changed their minds and returned to him so that he wouldn't stab them in the meantime. Unfortunately, he was already gone. But there is no doubt about the papers. It is the identity card of David Jonas from Vienna!«*

*»Where did all this take place?«*

*»Near Stazione Termini. The three men live in the area. They are brothers and their names are Torretti.«*

*»Stazione Termini?« the monsignor repeats incredulously. »What on earth was this Jonas doing in this godforsaken place?«*

*»Unfortunately, I can't tell you that either. In any case, the fact is that these three brothers have no fixed abode and have already run afoul of the law several times in the station area there for*

*property crimes. Now they are claiming part of the reward we offered for the capture of the escaped child killer.«*

*»That would be even nicer!« Scarelli laughs out loud. »Shall I tell you what happened there? The three of them attacked and robbed that Jonas guy in the station area. Afterwards they saw the wanted posters and realized what a big fish they had let slip through their fingers. Now they want to get at least part of the reward through the stolen identity papers!«*

*»That may well be,« Alberto Bonelli agrees with him. »The three claimed that David Jonas didn't have any money on him. But I suspect that they simply kept it and now want to turn the ID card into money as well. I just don't understand where this Jonas guy went. Maybe they beat him to death and are now telling us a fairy tale!«*

*»I don't think so! In that case, they would have been entitled to the full reward. They would have just put it down as self-defense.«*

*»Or someone else found him and brought him to safety!«*

*»In this area? My dear Bonelli! You must have read the story of the Good Samaritan too often in the Gospel of Luke! There are no Samaritans in these slums. Actually, I can only imagine a sequence of events: This Jonah picked himself up after the attack and ran away. But that also means that now he must be out there somewhere without identification, luggage and papers. We'd have to be in a hell of a fix if we didn't catch him sooner or later! Let's put ourselves in his position. What would be then the shortest way, on which he could return again into its homeland?«*

*»You mean on foot, Monsignor?«*

*»On foot, by bus, by boat - it doesn't matter, just definitely he can't fly!«*

*»The shortest way to the Danube domain is via the Adriatic. It is less than three hundred kilometers from here to Ancona. If he could manage to get a ship passage to Zadar there, he would*

*almost have reached his destination! The watershed of the Danube domain runs in close proximity there.«*

*»Then send Bruno to Ancona. Tell him to wait there for this Jonas. If he actually chooses this route, he's guaranteed to be stuck in Ancona for a few days before he finds a ship to take him. Bruno should keep his ears open at the port. After all, he knows what to do if this Jonas shows up. Other alternatives?«*

*»Well, Monsignor. He could try to leave the city on one of the pilgrim buses. But we have been checking every departing bus for days. If he tried that, he would have already fallen into our trap. Of course, he could also be on foot on one of the pilgrim roads. But without money and luggage? He won't get far there!«*

*»Bonelli, do not underestimate this Jonas! He will surely beat down the first pilgrim and rob him of his things. Then he plays the poor wanderer and make a pilgrimage north along the Via Francigena! Send telegrams to all the monasteries on the various pilgrimage routes north of Rome. The abbots and abbesses should immediately report to the Vatican if he seeks shelter in their monastery. Write that the wanted man has desecrated the tomb of St. Benedict in Montecassino. The religious are very sensitive to this kind of thing!«*

*»I will set this in motion, Monsignor! I am sure that sooner or later we will catch this David Jonas.«*

*»I should hope so, Bonelli! Is there anything new from this Roman journalist?«*

*»Unfortunately no! This Gianna Marconi has also disappeared without a trace. She was last seen leaving Salvatore Pollini, shot by Bruno, at the Colosseum. After that, her trail disappears. It's really mysterious. Her parents have also disappeared. And their apartment in Trastevere has been empty for a few days. None of the neighbors know where the Marconis currently are.«*

*»What about friends and acquaintances?«*

*»Gianna Marconi has been living in a shared apartment with two young people. The young man is also untraceable at the moment. But Bruno has tracked down the woman and questioned her in his irresistible way. However, she definitely knows nothing about the current whereabouts of Gianna Marconi.«*

*»Did she survive the questioning?« Scarelli wants to know casually.*

*»Of course, for God's sake! We can't eliminate half the Roman population because of this matter! Enough blood has already been shed and more than enough fuss has already been made! It's about time we kept the ball low again!«*

*»You may be right, Bonelli! But I want to see success at last! I hold you personally responsible that this Jonas and this journalist are finally caught. I wish you a good night. And ask Saint Anthony of<sup>24</sup> Padua in your night prayer for assistance!«*

*»One more question Monsignor: what am I supposed to say to these Torretti brothers? Do they get their share of the reward?«*

*»Hmm, whatever. Give them a third of the bounty on the capture and tell them that they will get the rest if they deliver this criminal to us dead or alive. You have to keep such people warm, Bonelli! Our good old Bruno won't live forever either, and useful idiots have to be brought in when the time comes. Always remember that!«*

## **Study tour**

It's a cold morning in April when Jan Eckert boards the S-Bahn at Cologne's main train station to Konrad Adenauer Airport. It has snowed again during the night. There is still no sign of spring. This year, winter has had an unusually long icy grip on the Rhine domain. »I wonder if I'll be able to sit outside in my short shirt tonight,« Jan asks himself as he thinks about the destination of his flight today.

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24 Anthony of Padua: patron saint of seekers, among others

When he reaches the airport a short time later, his travel group is already fully assembled at the departure gate. In addition to Professor Guggenmoser and three of his foundation professors, five other doctoral students, three male and two female, are members of the delegation. Jan knows four of them only by sight and in passing. On the other hand, he has a friendly relationship with Andreas Wegener. Andreas started his doctorate at about the same time as Jan. He is working on highly complicated mathematical models and domain simulations. What exactly is meant by this, however, no one but he himself seems to know. Even for Jan, who has never had a hard time with mathematical topics, Andreas' specialty is a closed book.

While the group is still sitting at the gate, Professor Guggenmoser lectures on the rules of etiquette of the foreign culture, which the members of the delegation are expected to follow in the coming days. You can tell that he must have been there many times and is obviously very familiar with Oriental customs. But it is probably also a matter of making his role as head of the delegation unmistakably clear from the outset.

The group boards the plane punctually at the scheduled boarding time. Jan is pleased as punch when he realizes that he is sitting right by the window. He has only flown three times in his life so far. Once to Gran Canaria and twice to Mallorca. He wonders how long ago that was! He was still a child then. Most of the time, his family had vacationed at the North Sea. He had always considered the driving there pretty sucky. But in retrospect, it had been nicer there than in the big tourist silos on the Spanish islands.

After the plane has taken off, Jan sees the elongated Rhine valley below him. The city below must be Bonn. This insignificant suburb of the domain capital Cologne was supposedly once the capital of the great Federal Republic of Germany! But that must have been long before Jan was born. He can just remember Berlin as the so-called federal capital, and even that is now an eternity ago.

After a short climb, the plane dives into a dense cloud cover. »Too bad,« Jan thinks to himself, because he would have liked to look at his home from above for a while longer. The small monitor in the back of the seat in front shows the current flight progress. It doesn't take long before they are already over Frankfurt am Main. Somewhere down there must be the disused airport. After Cologne had established itself as the domain capital, Frankfurt's Rhine-Main Airport fell into a slumber. After the economic crash, all air traffic had come to a complete standstill. And when a weak demand for cross-domain flights slowly developed again, the modern Cologne airport proved to be fully adequate to handle the few takeoffs and landings that were required. The former air hub in Frankfurt was mothballed and kept on standby as a reserve airport in case air traffic ever regained its former importance. At the moment, however, it does not look like that will happen. For most of the inhabitants of the Rhine domain, flying is an unimaginable luxury and those who are looking for a few days of rest and relaxation will find it in the romantic river landscape of the Middle Rhine between Bingen and Königswinter. The lodging establishments there have meanwhile returned to the old splendor of the last century and are pleased to see new visitor records from year to year.

Only a few minutes later, the plane crosses the border to the Danube domain. The clouds clear again. Although the aircraft has now almost reached its cruising altitude, Jan can see cities, fields and forests passing by below him. Above Passau, he recognizes the confluence of the Danube and Inn rivers. For several kilometers, the light sediment-laden waters of the Inn flow harmoniously alongside those of the dark Danube. Until, after the next big bend, the two rivers unite to form a huge stream that slowly pushes its way in many bends towards the southeast. Vienna, Budapest and Bucharest are other city names that Jan knows from geography lessons and that gradually appear next to the thick blue line that slowly moves across the display of the flight monitor.

Halfway through the flight, they reach the coastline of the Black Sea. The flight attendants have already started distributing lunch. The passengers



can choose between pork, chicken and pasta. Jan takes the opportunity to fill his belly with pork for the last time. If he can believe the words of his professor, he will probably have to do without it in the coming days. And he doesn't miss the opportunity to have one last glass of Kölsch beer. After the meal, he talks to the person sitting next to him. The man had seemed somehow familiar to him from the start. Now it turns out that he is a former colleague from Grasmann GmbH, where Jan had worked as a student trainee. He is a sales employee and often travels on business trips. Jan had probably seen the man a few times in the cafeteria and unconsciously noticed him. At the moment, he is on a three-day working visit to the oil city of Basra.

*»Traveling for two weeks with a guided tour group!« he repeats, wide-eyed, when Jan tells him what he plans to do in Baghdad.  
»There are so many interesting cities to see in this country. One more rich in history than the other. While you students are off sightseeing, I poor sod have to explain the benefits of our new product range to the sheiks in the Gulf. How I envy you!«*

After Jan has told his ex-colleague in broad strokes the sightseeing program of his stay, they both lean back and take a little nap. Meanwhile, the plane crosses the Black Sea and the Anatolian highlands. As the pilot begins his descent, Jan wakes up again. The green fields of Mesopotamia already stretch out below them. Shortly after he can see the blue ribbon of a wide river, a voice sounds from the loudspeaker:

*»Ladies and Gentlemen! We will shortly be arriving at our destination airport in Baghdad. Please fold up your tables now and put your seat backs upright. On behalf of the entire crew, I would like to say goodbye and thank you for flying with Rhine Air. We hope you had a pleasant flight and would be happy to welcome you back on board soon.«*

Jan's hands get wet. If there's anything he doesn't like about flying, it's the landings. But as one would expect, everything goes smoothly. Accompanied by the pathetic sounds of Richard Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries, the plane touches down gently on the runway and rolls out

slowly. It then follows a follow-me vehicle to its final parking position on the apron.

Before the passengers disembark, the captain announces over the loudspeaker and apologizes that, due to the acute congestion of the airport, there was unfortunately no passenger bridge available and the disembarkation must therefore take place the old-fashioned way via the gangway. Jan enjoys to breathe a little bit airport air this way. As he leaves the cold plane and descends the steep stairs, the muggy air hits him like an invisible wall. Jan suddenly feels transported to another world. The airport building is surrounded by green palm trees and looks like an oasis in the middle of the desert compared to the rest of the surroundings. The signs on the buildings are almost all written in Arabic script. Their curved flourishes are beautiful to look at, but tell Jan nothing about their meaning. Two men in long white robes hurry to one of the large aircraft hangars. They look as if they have come out of one of the fairy tales from the Arabian Nights.

When the passengers are brought to the terminal by two buses, the atmosphere becomes a bit more western again. The customs check inside the airport building is quite slow. The officials meticulously check each passport and each of the visa documents. The lengthy procedure drags on for over an hour. When the group finally leaves the customs building and reaches the arrivals area, a hustle and bustle of people awaits them. Many are holding signs in the air, but most of them have illegible Arabic characters printed on them. Finally, the group spots a man with a sign that says "GUUGENMSER" in large letters. Professor Guggenmoser introduces himself and his companions to the young man. Judging by his age, he is probably a student. He leads the tour group to the exit of the airport, where a minibus is waiting. An hour later, the delegation has checked into their rooms at the Hotel Babylon. Jan and Andreas share a double room.

*»Have you ever been in such a great hotel?« Andreas asks curiously as the two enter their fifth-floor room.*

*»In a luxury hotel like this?« Jan replies, »Of course not! When I was a kid, before the crisis, I sometimes stayed in a hotel with my parents on vacation. Most of the time we rented a vacation apartment somewhere and took care of ourselves there. It was cheaper! From time to time we were also in a so-called hotel, but this here is a different category!«*

*»Same for me. Sometimes we went to all-inclusive resorts where you had to fight with the other guests at the buffet over the food. But that was also a long time ago. Did you see? Our room has a direct view of the Tigris River. You can see the barges passing by down there.«*

*»I wouldn't be surprised if someone flew by here on a carpet!«*

Jan has barely finished his sentence when a loud male voice begins to blare from a loudspeaker outside.

*»What's that,« Andreas wonders, opening the door to the balcony.*

*»The muezzin calls to prayer! Look down there: The men there are already crouching on the floor and bowing in the direction of Mecca. As far as I know, that happens here five times a day! As soon as he hears the muezzin's call, the devout Muslim drops everything and starts praying.«*

*»Just imagine if the Muslims in Cologne were to shout like that. After all, they have to put up with our bell ringing, too.«*

*»I think you're crazy! Every civilization should preserve its own traditions. Multiculturalism is all well and good, as long as it's about celebrating and eating. As far as religion is concerned, everyone should do what he wants. But please in silence!«*

*»Could you imagine studying here in Baghdad?« Andreas asks.*

*»Why not? One or two semesters abroad here at the university would definitely not be bad. You'd just have to be able to afford it!«*

*»I've also heard that they charge horrendous tuition fees here. Just like at the American elite universities at Harvard or Yale in the past. It's kind of funny! Before the crash, everyone wanted to study in America or get their degree there. Today, American universities are forgotten and anyone wants to study here in Baghdad! The university campus, as far as I know, starts right behind the hotel and now fills almost the entire area of the Tigris River loop. It must be quite huge!«*

*»We will definitely get to know it enough in the next few days. So when are we going to meet with our hosts?«*

*»Didn't you hear what the Guggenmoser said? In an hour in the convention center of the hotel.«*

## **Balkanroute**

The next morning, Gianna and David talk to the landlord of their hostel. They ask him point-blank who to turn to in Siena if they want to travel to northern Europe in a way that is not entirely legal. The innkeeper is anything but surprised. Too often he has hosted guests who have turned to him more or less confidently with such a request. Without asking much, he sends his guests to his old acquaintance Fernando DiSelva.

*»Go through the Kontrade <sup>25</sup>Bruco until you reach Porta O vile. There you leave the old town and go to Via Guiseppe Mazzini. Ask for the gas station. There is only one in town. The owner is a friend of mine. Tell him Francesco sent you.«*

Shortly afterwards, Gianna and David set off. A fine aroma of fresh croissants and coffee emanates from a small bar. Their stomachs growl and they can't resist. They enter and first have a proper breakfast.

*»And what are we going to tell this gas station guy?« Gianna asks.*

*»Well, that we want to get to the Danube domain by the fastest way!« David answers in surprise.*

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25 Contradas: Sienese neighborhoods competing against each other at the Palio competition

*»You want to go there! I don't actually know where I want to go yet!«*

*»Why don't you want to come to Vienna with me first? I have to convince the authorities that I am alive and well. After that, I can support you much better in your own plans. I thought we had already agreed on that!«*

*»I don't want to be a burden to you!«*

*»Oh nonsense! After all you've done for me? Without you, I would never have gotten out of Rome alive! I am so deeply in your debt. I can never make up for that!«*

David gives Gianna a very gentle nudge on the tip of her nose and smiles at her. She returns the favor with a good peck on his upper arm and then smiles mischievously back. After polishing off their croissants and finishing their cappuccino, they set off again. It doesn't take long before they reach the two old archways of Porta Ovile, where the narrow streets of the old town end.

After a quarter of an hour, they reach the gas station. A young attendant is busy supplying some trucks and motorcycles with gasoline. When Gianna asks him where his boss can be found, he scowls and points to a house at the end of the lot. They walk past the two old gas pumps and head straight for the unspectacular house. An office on the ground floor and an apartment on the floor above. A functional building, like thousands of others in this area.

*»Hello, is anyone there?« Gianna calls as they enter through the open door.*

*»Wait a minute!« a loud male voice answers from the upper floor.  
»I'll be right there!«*

A man comes down the stairs with quick steps. Gianna estimates him to be in his late forties, maybe early fifties. He wears his long, grayish hair combed back. A swanky watch dangles from his wrist. Before he can say anything, Gianna calls out to him:

*»Francesco sent us to you! The landlord of the Albergo Francesco.«*

*»So so, my friend Francesco! Let me guess then! You are passing through here and are tired of the heat of the south!«*

*»You could say that,« Gianna replies. »My friend and I want to go to the Danube Domain, but we don't have valid papers. Can you help us there?«*

*»Maybe! Come on in for now. We'll go to my office.«*

This so-called office is a mess. File folders pile up in front of and on the desk. Piles of paper lie all over the place. The ashtray on the desk is overflowing. Curtains hang in front of the window - as gray as if they had been washed for the last time in the twentieth century. At least there is a telephone on the desk, giving the office a certain professional character.

*»My name is Fernando DiSelva. With whom do I have the honor?«*

*»My name is Gianna and this is my friend David. He is from Vienna and he doesn't speak Italian.«*

*»From Vienna? Didn't you say you were going to the Danube domain?«*

*»The story is a little complicated,« Gianna tries to reassure the irritated DiSelva. »My friend has no valid papers. In the Po domain, they won't believe him that he has Danubian citizenship.«*

*»Don't you lie to me! The business that my friends and I run is based on absolute trust. And it's based on mutual trust. You have to tell me the truth about yourselves so that we can find the best solution together. Do we understand each other?«*

*»Yes, of course. Why would we lie to you? If David manages to get into the Danube domain unharmed, he'll be safe. If he is caught before then, he will be deported again and the game will start all over.«*

*»And what about you?«*

*»I come from Rome and I am his companion, so to speak.«*

*»I can imagine that!« DiSelva laughs out loud. »You're hoping for a life of luxury alongside that boy north of the Alps! The classic female economic refugee act!«*

Gianna would like to beat this arrogant asshole to death on the spot. But she thinks better of it and tries to stay as calm as possible.

*»My motives are my own business, I guess. I don't think it matters to your business!«*

*»No, it isn't either. Still, I'd like to see your papers.«*

*»Do we have to? We only have passes from the Vatican. And they are - well - they are forged.«*

*»Still, I need something for my records. A refugee organization is more bureaucratic than you think. I'd like to make a copy of your passes!«*

Gianna hands him the forged documents. DiSelva examines them with a practiced eye and murmurs:

*»All respect! That's a neat job! We could not have done better!«*

He scans the passes with a multifunction printer. Then he gives them back to Gianna.

*»So how did you guys think you were going to escape?«*

*»That's what we actually wanted to know from you! We want to get to the Danube as soon as possible!«*

*»So kids, here's the deal: I'm going to talk to my contact later today and present your case to him. Based on the information I've gotten from you, he'll work out the best escape route for you. We usually offer an all-inclusive package. In your case, this means we will organize your transportation from Siena to beyond the border of the Danube domain. The exact escape route depends on*

*many factors. I guess that in your case the way by ship across the Adriatic Sea will be the most suitable. The final decision depends on many factors. You have to pay in advance. How much money do you have?»*

*»This is none of your business! Make us an offer! We will then decide whether to accept it or not. By when do you expect an answer from your contact?»*

*»I'll try to reach him by phone tonight. Just come by again tomorrow. Maybe I'll know more by then!»*

*»All right, see you tomorrow!» Gianna answers and leaves the office with David.*

As they walk back to the old town, Gianna tells David what the escape agent had said.

*»By boat across the Adriatic?» David repeats and claps his forehead with the flat of his hand. »I can't believe I didn't think of that myself! Over there in the Balkans, the Danube domain almost reaches the sea. The Drina's catchment area begins just beyond the coastline. The Drina flows into the Sava and the Sava into the Danube near Belgrade.«*

*»You seem to have been paying attention in geography,« Gianna says dryly.*

*»How huge do you think the Danube domain is! But I had almost forgotten about the Sava. It is the most water-rich tributary that the Danube has at all! Which port on the Adriatic is the fastest to reach from Siena?»*

*»I'm guessing Ancona. However, we then have to go quite a long way through the interior of the country.«*

*»Gee Gianna, just imagine! Maybe they will transport us to Ancona with a truck. We board a ship there and a day later we are in the territory of the Danube domain! This is too good to be true!»*



*»You said it. Wait and see what other surprises this arrogant snoot has in store for us.«*

But David doesn't let Gianna's skeptical tones spoil his joy. He feels closer to his goal than ever before. Gianna is also quite satisfied with the result of this first conversation. Her uncertainty is more due to the fact that she does not know what to expect in this strange large domain. Here in Siena, she still feels connected to her homeland in some way. Here she can talk to people in their native language. Here she knows the worries and hardships that people have to deal with on a daily basis. But what will await her in the Balkans? Far away from the domain capital Vienna, where fox and hare say good night to each other. The Balkans have never been at peace all these years. Long before the great economic crash, the hostile ethnic groups there were massacring each other. Is German spoken there at all? As far as she knows, German is the official language of the Danube domain. But this is only because the influential cities in the north have enforced it by decree. In the areas near the coast, Croatian is certainly spoken, and neither of them two understands it.

The sun is already high in the sky when Gianna and David reach the city center at Piazza del Campo. At a small exchange office, Gianna exchanges some of her Roman lire for Ombroni lire. The exchange fees are horrendous and since she doesn't know how much longer they will be in the Ombrone's catchment area<sup>26</sup>, she doesn't think it makes sense to exchange more than is absolutely necessary. Besides, no one needs to know how much money they are traveling with. They think about what to do with the rest of the day and decide to explore the city on foot. When their feet start to hurt, they find a shady spot on the steps in front of the cathedral square.

*»Tell me David,« Gianna asks, »have you ever been to the south of your domain?«*

*»You mean where we expect to cross the border?«*

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26 Ombrone: river in Tuscany. It flows into the Tyrrhenian Sea near Grosseto.

*»Yeah right!«*

*»No, never. This region is considered the poorhouse of the Danube domain. Nobody goes there voluntarily!«*

*»Will we be safe there?«*

*»What does safe mean? The regional government of the sub-domain Drina.Sava.Danube is subordinated to the central government in Vienna just like all other sub-domains. However, there are many special regulations and exceptions down there. The domain system never really caught on in practice there.«*

In fact, it had taken a very long time after the Great Crash for the former Balkan states to bring themselves to join the Danube domain. The various ethnic groups were too hostile to agree on a common approach. Only the prospect of economic recovery persuaded the population to engage in this experiment. The rifts that had to be overcome, however, were not only of a geographical nature. While Europe enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity, a merciless war raged in disintegrating Yugoslavia between Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Albanians, and other ethnic groups. In the Srebrenica massacre, more than eight thousand Bosnians were slaughtered and buried in mass graves before the eyes of Dutch Blue Helmet soldiers. But the killing in Srebrenica was nothing compared to earlier crimes.

At the end of the Second World War, the troops collaborating with Germany had fled in the direction of Austria. With them also fled thousands of civilians who had been on the wrong side during the war - that is, not on the side of the partisans around Marshal Tito. The British occupation forces were unable to deal with this stream of refugees and delivered the people seeking protection to the Yugoslav People's Liberation Army. The gruesome events began in the Bleiburg massacre. In total, several hundred thousand people were killed in mass shootings, death marches and in Tito's prison camps. Men, women and children were shot, buried in mass graves or simply thrown into one of the many holes in the Yugoslavian karst landscape.

How was peace ever to return to the Balkans? Under Tito's rule, Yugoslavia was ruled as an artificial multi-ethnic state with a hard hand and Soviet benevolence. After Tito's death, this state structure disintegrated as quickly as it had been created. One major cause was the distribution of money. The rich republics, such as Croatia and Slovenia, demanded larger portions of the funds they had generated for themselves, while Bosnia, Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia demanded a larger share as compensation for their poor economic situation. This conflict could not be resolved politically. The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia became the blueprint for the later disintegration of the European Union.

David has never been interested in the history of the Balkans. For him, the southwest of his home domain is merely a wild picture-book landscape from the stories of Karl May. He is eager to finally see this region with his own eyes. But first they have to reach the watershed of the Danube domain. And to do that, they have to make it to Ancona and onto a ship. It's still a long way home.

## **Bridge outrage**

Baghdad - In the hotel's convention center, Jan and his fellow travelers are greeted by the tour guide. Rana, a young woman of about thirty, first introduces herself and then the program for the coming two weeks. Twelve strenuous days in the tour bus lie ahead of them. The tour will start in Diyarbakir, the Kurdish capital of southeastern Anatolia. In addition to the ten-member delegation from Cologne University, two other academic groups are also taking part. The Faculty of Economics of the Sorbonne has arrived from Paris with ten members and the University of Milan has also sent ten participants to the Orient. The university in Baghdad maintains intensive contacts with very many European universities. Rana studied a few semesters in Cologne and Paris before she started working as a tour guide and speaks fluent German and French. She could also easily communicate in Italian with the visitors from the Po domain. In view of the composition of the group, however, they agree on English as the

common conversational language. Following the bus tour, two more days are planned on the university campus in Baghdad, which will be used for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

After the introductory event, a joint dinner is on the agenda. The host university has not let itself be left behind and chartered one of the luxurious Tigris steamers for a dinner trip. Accompanied by the sounds of shawms and feasting on all kinds of delicious specialties of Oriental cuisine, the guests sail on the boat for three hours through Baghdad at night. Rana expertly explains all the sights of the magnificent city, from the new palace of the caliph, to the many mosques visible from the river, to the ruins of the former palace of former despot Saddam Hussein. It is long past midnight when the tour group returns to the hotel. The remaining night is short. Jan's head is full of new impressions. A few hours after he finally falls asleep, his alarm clock rings again.

Early in the morning, the tour group sets off for the airport. A turboprop plane is already waiting to take them to the starting point of their bus trip. It is shortly before noon when they land at Abdullah Ocalan Airport in Diyarbakir and transfer to the comfortable coach. Compared to Baghdad, Diyarbakir seems inhospitable and forbidding. Monotonous high-rise housing estates in the middle of a desolate, brown, hilly moonscape. At least, that is the first impression Jan has when leaving the airport terminal. Only when the bus reaches the banks of the Tigris River does the beige-brown monotony of the city and the countryside turn into a lush green. At the old Tigris Bridge - the so-called Ten Eyes Bridge - Rana asks the bus driver to stop and accompanies her travel guests on a walk across the one-thousand-year-old structure.

*»Do you know why this bridge is called Ten Eyes bridge?« Jan asks Andreas.*

Professor Guggenmoser, who is walking directly behind Jan and Andreas, has heard the question and does not give Andreas a chance to answer at all:

*»Because of the ten bridge arches, which are supposed to look like eyes. You can't see that from up here, of course. But if you take a look at the bridge from the side on the other bank, you'll understand how the name came about.«*

*»These Shattis are nuts! Do you see those high-rise buildings at the end of the bridge? Was there no other place here in this desert to put these concrete silos? Right in the line of sight of the bridge! That must make any architect's stomach turn!«*

*Andreas agrees with him: »Exactly! Over there, there's nothing but bare landscape. These concrete bunkers completely destroy the overall impression of this historic structure. When we built the Waldschlößchen bridge in Dresden, UNESCO revoked the Elbe Valley's World Heritage status. At the time, there were good reasons for building this bridge. And here they rape an ancient piece of human culture and no one cares?«*

*»Now, slow down, young man,« the professor replies. »UNESCO has not existed for a long time. On the other hand, you're right: When it still existed, it really didn't cover itself with glory here in Diyarbakir. The sight of skyscrapers behind the bridge is not exactly beautiful, but on the other hand it was never the real problem. Tastes differ, and when the Turks were still in charge here, they found the combination of an old bridge with modern high-rises to be contemporary and chic. We should not interfere with our western ideas. The main thing is that no one gets the idea of blowing up such a structure for religious reasons, as the IS did in Palmyra! The stone bridge will certainly stand here in this place for another thousand years, while these modern concrete buildings will certainly have collapsed again in a hundred years. Some problems solve themselves.«*

*»I get it,« Jan says, »but what does UNESCO have to do with the bridge now?«*

*»With the bridge - nothing!« continues Guggenmoser. »But in 2015, UNESCO declared the city wall of Diyarbakir a World Heritage Site. It is one of the largest and best-preserved ancient fortifications in the world. The Roman emperor Constantius II*

*had it built in the fourth century A.D. because he wanted to turn the previously rather insignificant town into a fortress on the border with Persia. The wall is five kilometers long and encloses the entire old city of Diyarbakir.«*

*»It's okay to declare something like this a world heritage site!«  
says Andreas.*

*»Yes, it is. But UNESCO then stood idly by as the Turkish army flattened and depopulated a large part of the old city a few months later. At that time, there was fighting against a few Kurdish separatists who had entrenched themselves in the Old City. At the time, the army rigorously drove out the local population and razed parts of the historic Old City to the ground. UNESCO stayed out of it and put a good face on the matter. You will be surprised how fake and modern the old town looks today. The Turks simply created facts at that time and ignored all concerns.«*

*»And in Dresden, UNESCO made such a fuss over the construction of a new bridge?«*

Andreas can't believe it. He had grown up in Saxony and his parents had often grumbled about UNESCO's actions. First they had threatened to withdraw the World Heritage status and then, when the people of Dresden refused to be blackmailed, actually put this into action. But even when the new bridge was completed, pressure continued to be exerted. The new bridge was to be torn down and replaced by a tunnel. If the economic crisis had not come, this crazy plan might even have been put into practice. Today, no one in the Elbe domain would even think of tearing down an intact bridge for aesthetic reasons and replacing it with a high-maintenance, power-hungry tunnel.

*»The destruction of the old city was not that long ago,« says Jan.  
»I should still be able to remember that! Wasn't that covered by the public media in Germany?«*

*»Oh, the media,« Guggenmoser waves off contemptuously, »they only report on what is currently the focus of public interest. At*

*that time, the refugee crisis was the big topic. At the time, Germany was interested in Turkey keeping the Syrian migrants off our backs. Relations with the Turks were already very tense. Do you think anyone would have been interested in further aggravating the situation because of the destruction of a city that hardly anyone in Germany knew about?»*

*»Nevertheless, there was a free press in Germany at that time. Why weren't these events made a topic of discussion?»*

*»They were! Just take a look at the Internet archives of the newspapers of the time. You will find some interesting articles by a journalist named Deniz Yücel. He was doing research in Diyarbakir at the time and wrote about the catastrophic situation in the Kurdish areas in the German media. Which did not sit well with him! The Turkish government unceremoniously arrested him during one of his visits to Turkey and threw him in jail.«*

*»He was probably too critical of the government.«*

*»Of course, as a journalist, he has denounced the behavior of the Turkish government. But he also criticized the actions of the PKK.<sup>27</sup> In war, there is not only the good and the bad side. Each party pursues its interests and is in the right from its point of view. The task of a journalist is to collect facts and report on them. However, the Turkish government nipped all journalism in the bud and de facto abolished freedom of the press. Yücel was accused of making propaganda for the PKK and other terrorist groups. While this did not correspond to the truth, it triggered certain reflexes among other European governments. After all, the PKK had also been classified as a terrorist organization in Germany. How could the Turks be blamed for bombing their positions in Diyarbakir and driving out their sympathizers?»*

*»Weren't Germany and Turkey even allies in NATO at that time?» Andreas wonders. »Couldn't even the German army have been involved in this?»*

*»No, the fight against the Kurds was an internal matter for Turkey. No one wanted to get involved and get their fingers*

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27 PKK: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, The Workers' Party of Kurdistan

*burned. The Turkish government in Ankara was never squeamish when it came to dealing with the Kurds. In Diyarbakir, even the mayors elected by the people were arrested because they were said to have connections to the PKK. And in the old city, where many PKK fighters had found shelter, they obviously wanted to make an example. They simply cut off people's water and electricity and forced them to leave their homes. After months of street fighting, the bulldozers arrived in the most embattled areas and flattened everything. Thank God these troubled times are over now. Since the city became part of the Shatt al-Arab domain, the Kurds have enjoyed extensive autonomy here. The wounds of war have healed. As far as I know, our hotel today is located in one of the new construction districts within the city walls. So tonight we will see what the historic center of Diyarbakir looks like now!«*

## **Heads or tails**

When Gianna and David return to the hostel in the evening, Stella and Vito have disappeared. Francesco curses like a tinker. The two have left Siena head over heels and have owed him the accommodation costs for the last two nights. Instead of them, ten pilgrims have arrived at the hostel and have crisscrossed the dormitory. The night in the Albergo Francesco is a nightmare. A restful sleep is out of the question. Some of the men snore without pause, as if they had to cut down an entire forest by dawn. One pilgrim has obviously spoiled his stomach and spends half the night in the neighboring toilet. There he pukes his guts out so that the entire cellar trembles from his choking noises. Worst of all, however, is a young couple who are unmistakably busy trying to get their hormone levels back on track. As much as they try to be discreet, their breathing and moaning, as well as the rhythmic rustling of the straw mattress, cannot be ignored due to the close proximity to Gianna and David's sleeping place. Every time their strained lovemaking has unloaded in a brilliant finale and a little quiet returns to the dormitory, Gianna and David give a short sigh and hope that they will finally find some sleep. Shortly thereafter, the rustling begins anew.



In the morning, Gianna and David feel exhausted. Only the croissants and coffee in the small bar slowly bring back their spirits. On their way to the gas station, this time they make a detour through the Kontrade Istrice - the district of the porcupines. Everywhere flags, coats of arms and other symbols of the Kontrade hang on the houses and announce the glorious victory at the last Palio tournament.

When they reach the service station, Fernando DiSelva is already sitting in his office and gives the impression of being intensively occupied with his bookkeeping. The stub of a hand-rolled cigarette slowly glows between his fingers. When he sees Gianna and David enter, he greets them effusively:

*»Ah, the young couple in love. A very good morning to you. I hope you slept well?«*

He winks at David as if he were his best buddy since childhood. Of course, David doesn't understand a word and just smiles helplessly but friendly back.

*»Good morning to you too!« Gianna replies with the friendliness of a stolen madam. »Any news from your contact?«*

*»You bet! Take a seat!«*

Gianna and David move a few files lying in front of the desk to the side, get two wobbly wooden chairs from the corner and carefully settle down on them.

*»I had a long phone conversation with the head of our organization last night. I described your case to him and asked for his opinion. His first suggestion was, as I had already suspected, a ship passage across the Adriatic to Zadar and from there on to the domain border of the Danube.«*

*»That's what we had in mind, too,« Gianna replies. »How much would that cost?«*

*»Not so fast! During his further research, however, he encountered a few problems that make this escape route seem somewhat problematic. One problem is the few ships that are*

*currently calling at the port of Zadar. In Ancona a ship would leave tomorrow. But with the best will in the world we won't reach it! The next ship, which would be in question, leaves only in three weeks. To make matters worse, our people in Zadar are having increasing problems getting our customers safely across the border. The government of the Danube domain massively tightened border controls a week ago. This happens again and again at irregular intervals, and at the moment it is therefore particularly difficult to enter the domain illegally there.«*

*»That doesn't sound good!« says Gianna disappointed.*

*»But there is also good news! We have recently had extremely good experience with a new escape route. In this we would take you to Livorno and from there by ship to Genoa.«*

*»Genoa?« Gianna repeats, as if she had misheard. »That's a huge detour!«*

*»Take it easy! From there at the moment we have perfect transition conditions to the Po domain. We can take you to Milan and from there immediately on to Trieste. From there it is only a few kilometers to the border of the Danube domain. Our people in Trieste would receive you and bring you across the border unnoticed. And the best thing about it: tomorrow we could already start! Tomorrow I will go to Livorno with the tanker for a new load of diesel and gasoline for the gas station. I would take you with me and hand you over to a colleague in Livorno. Ships to Genoa run quite frequently from Livorno. And once you get there, it's on to Milan and Trieste by rail!«*

*»By train?« Gianna repeats incredulously.*

*»Well, you can't expect a first-class compartment now! You won't find out exactly how this will work until shortly before departure. This is our trade secret and we have to make sure that this knowledge doesn't fall into the wrong hands. I hope you understand that!«*

*»And what would this fun cost us?«*

*»What currency would you guys pay in?«*

*»If possible in Roman lire.«*

DiSelva picks up a large calculator and begins typing numbers into the antediluvian device. Then he announces his result:

*»For you exactly one hundred thousand Roman lire.«*

*»WHAT?«* Gianna cries out indignantly, causing even David, who has been silently following the conversation, to flinch. *»That's double what we still have in cash with us! What would the alternative via Ancona cost?«*

*»That would be a lot cheaper. But my boss said that due to the current security situation on the Balkan side, we will not be carrying out any transports in this direction in the near future. That is not negotiable! You will have to find someone else to take you there. And you can believe me: you won't find anyone in the wide radius of Siena!«*

Gianna is devastated. Their beautiful dream of a quick and trouble-free escape towards Vienna has just burst like a soap bubble. The land route on the pilgrimage route is blocked to them, the passage across the Adriatic Sea is made impossible due to the increased border controls and the only remaining alternative fails because of money.

*»I'd like to consult with my friend,«* Gianna said softly, once she got over the initial shock.

*»Do that!«* DiSelva replies. *»In the meantime, I'll make another call to my contact. Maybe he can accommodate you a little more on the price.«*

Gianna takes David by the hand and pulls him outside. They take a seat on a pile of old tires next to the gas station shack and discuss what to do now.

*»How is this train ride supposed to work?«* David asks after Gianna has told him the course of the conversation word for word.

*»He just didn't reveal that! That would be a kind of trade secret, he said.«*

*»And the one hundred thousand Roman lire was his last word?«*

*»He wants to talk to his contact again to see if he can accommodate us a little more on the price. But I don't think we have any chance there with our fifty thousand lire!«*

*»Now wait and see what offer he comes up with next. After all, these southerners act like vendors in a Syrian bazaar.«*

*»Thanks for the compliment! In case it escaped your notice: I'm a Southerner, too, and I hate this horsing around like the plague. Especially when it involves my life!«*

*»What are we going to do if we don't reach a trade agreement?«*

*»I don't know! Maybe make our way to Ancona on our own and wait there for a ship to take us.«*

*»This could take forever!« David moans. »After all, these smugglers have the best connections to shipping companies and captains. They know exactly who they have to bribe to smuggle their clientele aboard a ship. How are we supposed to get anywhere on our own?«*

*»Then we'll just have to approach the right people in Ancona. I'm sure there are local escape workers there, too.«*

*»Now let's wait for the next offer from this smuggling ring. Then we'll see!«*

Gianna and David go back to DiSelva's office. They want to suggest that they think about his offer for one night and come back tomorrow. To their surprise, he is just finishing a phone call and asks them to take a seat in front of his desk again.

*»So my dears! I have good news: my boss will meet you in price. His latest offer is fifty thousand Roman lire. But you will have to accept a few sacrifices. Your accommodation in Livorno will be*

*quite primitive. At the regular price you would have stayed in a comfortable hotel with a balcony and a view of the sea. The current price only includes a hostel of the same category as that of my esteemed friend Francesco. Also, there is a small restriction on your arrival in Trieste. Our liaisons will pick you up from the train. However, you will have to cross the border to the Danube domain on your own. The guided border crossing with a guarantee of success is not included in this price. But this sounds worse than it is. As you probably know, Trieste is an affiliated special economic zone of the Danube domain. The difficulty is actually to get into the city, which is hermetically sealed from the outside, undetected. We will take care of that. The last meters over the more or less green border you should then actually manage on your own.«*

*»And tomorrow could be the day?« Gianna asks uncertainly.*

*»Tomorrow we leave early in the morning with the tanker. Five thousand lire are due immediately upon departure. That's my modest share. Twenty thousand you pay in Livorno directly on arrival to my colleague there. The rest is due before you board the ship for Genoa.«*

*»We are to pay the entire price before our ship has left the port of Livorno?«*

*»That's the deal. Everything is based on mutual trust. Our organization has rarely disappointed its customers, and we want it to stay that way. After all, we have a good reputation to lose!«*

Once again, Gianna and David retreat to the pile of tires in front of the gas station and discuss the pros and cons of the current offer. They talk their heads off for an hour, but can't quite decide for or against. Finally, they decide to flip a coin. Heads means: Ancona and escape across the Adriatic on their own. Tails means: accept DiSelva's offer. Gianna tosses a 10-lire coin in the air that she got as change at the bar that morning. When it lands on the back of her left hand, Gianna hits it with her right hand as hard as if it were necessary to mint the coin again. Only after a minute does she take heart and reluctantly release the coin. A copper-colored "10" sparkles at

them. When they make the first down payment shortly afterwards in DiSelva's office, he wonders how the head of Gianna Nannini came to be on the back of this other Gianna's hand.

## Genocide

The next morning, the tour group sets off on foot for the old town. Rana marches in front as the tour guide. She stops at every mosque and every other place of interest and lectures in detail about the characteristics of each building. Jan listens to her lectures with interest and wonders how long it must have taken her to acquire all this knowledge. While walking through the narrow streets, he chats with Natalie Kerkashian. She is also a doctoral student with Professor Guggenmoser and was also lucky enough to be able to participate in this study tour. Natalie is writing her dissertation on ethnic minority disadvantage in river system domains. Just as she starts to tell Jan about her Armenian ancestors, Rana speaks up again:

*»We are standing here in front of St. Giragos Cathedral, the largest Armenian church in the Middle East. It was built in 1371 and dedicated to St. Cyriac. During its long history it was often destroyed and rebuilt again and again. In particular, it was badly affected during the unrest of the First World War. In 2011, it was restored thanks to donations from wealthy exiled men. Unfortunately, only five years later it was destroyed again, this time by the Turkish troops during the PKK riots in the Old City. The final restoration was completed last year. Today, the church serves as a symbol of peace between the different religions in our domain.«*

*Natalie intervenes with a question: »As far as I know, the destruction took place in 1915 as part of the Armenian genocide!«*

*Rana looks uncertainly at the ground for a moment and then answers, »I am not aware of any genocide. The different religions of the Shatt al-Arab domain live together peacefully and in harmony.«*

Natalie takes an indignant breath. But before she can respond to this, in her eyes outrageous, denial of history, Professor Guggenmoser hisses at her with glittering eyes:

*»Be quiet, Mrs. Kerkashian! If you say one more word, I'll send you back to Cologne today!«*

Natalie swallows her anger and reluctantly complies with her professor's instruction. Meanwhile, Rana continues her explanations, unsettled:

*»Our Caliph Mustafa Al-Raschid has enshrined freedom of religion in the first article of our Domain Constitution. The Armenian Apostolic Church, like any other religious community, has the right to freely practice its religion. The Christian community here in the city has grown strongly again in recent years.«*

The tour guide has obviously quickly regained her usual routine. Full of pride, she now explains to the amazed group:

*»I am pleased to be able to give you a special surprise today: The Bishop of the Diocese of Diyarbakir has kindly allowed us to use the Cathedral of St. Giragos for a liturgical celebration in the Roman Catholic rite. As you may already know, the Milan delegation includes a priest who recently received his ordinations. He will celebrate Mass for you in about an hour.«*

Jan rolls his eyes when he hears this and whispers to Andreas:

*»That too! I am Protestant and have not been to church for years. What am I supposed to do in a Roman Catholic service?«*

*»What can I say first,« Andreas whispers back. »My parents left church long before I was born. I don't remember ever attending a church service at all!«*

Professor Guggenmoser makes a placating gesture and says quietly behind his hand:

*»Don't make such a fuss, gentlemen! In the eyes of our hosts, we are all devout Christians. So don't complicate matters*

*unnecessarily! Let them believe they are doing us some good and see it as an opportunity to expand your lack of religious competence a bit!«*

Jan and Andreas resign themselves to their fate. After Rana has explained the exterior architecture of the cathedral and the peculiar bell tower in detail, the group enters the interior. While the professors and students are led through the dark labyrinth of stone columns and brick arches, the priest from Milan discusses with the local priest in the sacristy the course of the planned Eucharistic celebration. Finally, the entire group gathers in one of the side chapels to celebrate the service together. Jan and Andreas look for a place at the very back in order to attract as little attention as possible with their religious ignorance. Unfortunately, Rana has the same idea and sits next to them. The Milanese delegation is seated at the very front of the altar. Behind them sit the Parisians and at the very back the people from Cologne. The group waits patiently for the Holy Mass to begin. After what felt like an eternity, a small bell rang and the two priests entered the altar room decorated with flowers. Jan knows the young priest from Milan only by sight. He was not even aware that they had a priest in their travel group. He had noticed the strange collar on his black shirt, but he did not know that it was the collar of a clergyman. Actually, Jan had assumed that the three delegations consisted entirely of economists. The meaning of the presence of a priest is not yet quite clear to him. But he will certainly have the opportunity to ask the young man about his professional background as the trip progresses.

The mass is held mostly in Latin. Jan notes with satisfaction that the other group members apparently understand as little as he does. The native priest confines himself to helping as an altar server, while the Milanese confidently takes charge of the liturgy. Jan wonders if there are any similarities at all in how the Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches conduct the service. »I'll look into it when I get home,« he resolves.



For the reading and the proclamation of the Gospel, the priest temporarily switches from Latin to English. He recites the translation of the long-lost first letter of the Apostle Bartholomew to the Armenians. When the assembled congregation realizes that the priest will refrain from preaching afterwards, an audible sigh of relief goes through the ranks. Now the more interesting part of the service begins. Jan and Andreas know that it is now about the symbolic transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But they are increasingly busy following the rapid change of standing up, sitting and kneeling down. Eventually, they do it like everyone else: They imitate the posture changes of the Milanese, who apparently are signaled discreet signs by their priest, which they follow unobtrusively. When communion is distributed, the wheat is finally separated from the chaff: while the Milanese approach the altar in unison to receive the corpus christi, the Parisians and Cologne residents prefer to remain seated on their benches and stare into space. At this point at the latest, Rana can no longer hide her astonishment at the strange behavior of her Christian travel group. When, after half an hour, the mass finally comes to an end and the priest pronounces the blessing over those gathered, relief can be seen in the faces of everyone present. Everyone seems happy to have put the matter behind them.

In the evening at the hotel, Natalie can finally vent her anger:

*»Now tell me, Professor: Why did you forbid me to speak this morning? That this so-called tour guide simply stands there and denies the Armenian genocide is an impertinence! Why do you take her in protection?«*

*»My dear Ms. Kerkashian,« Guggenmoser replies after making sure Rana is not around. »Tour guides in this domain have clear instructions on how to respond to certain political issues. Whether you like it or not, the mass murder of the Armenians is very reluctantly addressed here out of consideration for the Kurdish majority. It is a very complicated historical tragedy that has many facets. So what could be more obvious than to keep the matter quiet for foreign guests? You can be sure that our good*

*Rana knows the history of her homeland very well. However, she would get into tremendous trouble if she did not follow the strict instructions of her superiors.«*

*»Isn't the genocide of the Armenians to be blamed on the Turks?« Andreas intervenes in the conversation. »What problem do the inhabitants of the Shatt al-Arab domain have with it?«*

*»No, Professor Guggenmoser is right,« says Natalie. »The Kurds bear a heavy share of the blame for the atrocities of that time. In my family, we often talked about this topic. My great-great-grandparents fled from Turkey to Yerevan at that time. All my ancestors then lived in the Soviet Republic of Armenia and only my parents were able to emigrate to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But we also had relatives in the province of Diyarbakir who fell victim to the genocide. Under the reign of terror of Mehmed Reschid, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were brutally slaughtered here or sent on death marches into the desert. This so-called butcher of Diyarbakir was originally even a doctor. He compared the Armenian population with harmful microbes that had infested the body of the fatherland. He saw it as his medical duty to kill as many of these pests as possible. How perverse can one be? In truth, it was surely - as always - about money. Armenians used to be the social elite here. Lawyers, doctors, pharmacists - all Armenians. After their expulsion - or murder - their property fell to the state or directly to their murderers.«*

*»It kind of reminds me of the fate of the Jews in the Third Reich,« Jan says.*

*»Careful young man!« Guggenmoser retorts. »Holocaust comparisons have never gone down well with anyone! But they are quite right. The genocide of the Armenians in World War I is reminiscent in many respects of the extermination of the Jews in the Third Reich. It is true that the exact numbers of victims are difficult to determine. But there are reliable testimonies about what happened at the time. And the parallels to the Holocaust are truly astonishing. The concentration camps of Deir ez-Zor and*

*Ras el-Ain were the models for the Polish concentration camps at Auschwitz and Treblinka."*

*»There were concentration camps here?« marvels Andreas. »I always thought the concentration camps were an invention of the Nazis.«*

*»Not a trace! If you take a look at the history of concentration camps, you will find that such facilities have existed in countless countries. The English and the Americans can be called with good conscience the inventors of the Concentration Camps. Of course, these facilities should not generally be equated with the death camps where the Jews and the Armenians were murdered by the hundreds of thousands.«*

*»Well, I've had enough of these old stories for today,« Andreas says. »At some point, you have to let it go. What can we do about what happened so long ago? I think you should let the dead rest in peace and take care of today's problems instead of constantly digging around in the past!«*

With that, he gets up, wishes those present a good night and disappears to his room.

*»I see it differently,« Natalie says thoughtfully. »No one has ever really been interested in what happened to the Armenian people back then. The Nazis' deeds only became public because Germany lost the war back then. I wonder what would have happened if Hitler had emerged victorious from the Second World War. He is said to have said himself once that nobody talks about the extermination of the Armenians anymore. That was in 1939, not even twenty-five years after the Armenian genocide. Hitler was obviously firmly convinced that the extermination of the Jews would be forgotten just as the genocide of the Armenians had been. His calculations did not work out only because his extermination camps were liberated by the victorious powers and the Germans had to serve as scapegoats afterwards. The Armenians, on the other hand, were never given justice. Their murderers were never brought to justice. The survivors had to struggle along as homeless people in the diaspora or were*

*harassed by Stalin and consorts in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.«*

*»Are there no Armenians living in the Shatt al-Arab domain today?« Jan wants to know.*

*»I don't know the exact numbers,« Natalie replies. »But how could one count the descendants of the Armenians. During the expulsion, masses of young Armenian girls were abducted, raped, forcibly married and forced to convert to Islam. Many of the Kurds living here today have Armenian blood in their veins. They just don't talk about it. The subject is still taboo in society.«*

Professor Guggenmoser nods silently. Then he says:

*»You are certainly right on many points, Ms. Kerkashian. Nevertheless, I would like to ask you not to bring up the history of the Armenians again on this study trip. After all, our hosts are not constantly pointing out the dark sides of our past. In every nation there are people who are guilty of atrocious crimes. You know as well as I do what atrocities were committed in some countries after the global crash. Let us look forward and work to ensure that future generations do not repeat these mistakes. Don't stay up too late tonight! We have another busy day ahead of us tomorrow!«*

After these words, Professor Guggenmoser finishes his tea, says goodbye to his students and goes to his room.

## **Special zones**

Shortly before sunrise, Gianna and David leave the Albergo Francesco and go to the gas station one last time. Francesco DiSelva is already getting his tanker ready. The engine of the old street monster is already warming up, while DiSelva is checking the tire pressure.

*»Well, just in time!« he shouts loudly when he sees the two coming. »You can throw your backpacks behind the seat in the driver's cab!«*

Then he turns his attention back to his vehicle. Gianna and David get coffee and a few baked rolls at the gas station. After all, they had to do without breakfast in their favorite bar today and are glad that they don't have to start the long drive with an empty stomach.

After a quarter of an hour, DiSelva has finished his vehicle check and declared the old tanker truck sufficiently roadworthy. The three of them can easily sit side by side on the wide bench in the cab. DiSelva at the wheel, Gianna in the middle and David on the far right.

With a loud roar, the tanker truck rumbles through the Sienese suburbs and DiSelva honks aside anyone who obstructs his progress. Just beyond the city limits, the Ombrone domain ends and they reach the watershed to the Arno domain. At the sight of the roadblock, Gianna is startled and reflexively begins to look for their passes.

*»Let it go, girl!« DiSelva says calmly as he brings the tanker to a halt in front of the turnpike.*

He chats a bit with the street policeman and hands him a stack of papers. Between the sheets, there are a few banknotes that cannot be overlooked. The policeman stamps one of the driving documents and casually puts the banknotes in the breast pocket of his uniform. Then the two talk a bit more about the upcoming Palio. After DiSelva has wished the policeman a good day, the barrier opens and the journey continues.

Fernando DiSelva is in the best of moods today. As they approach Florence, he turns on the car radio and tries to get Radio Firenze in.

*»Imagine!« he says with enthusiasm. »In Florence, they now have a radio station that plays music around the clock! Unfortunately, we can't get it in Siena.«*

He sings along with all the songs at the top of his lungs and with a wry voice. After a while, Gianna joins in the singing and David feels like he's on one of Vienna's Danube bridges, when an excursion boat with a hundred alcoholic pensioners is sailing along below.

Soon, however, reception becomes too weak again and DiSelva turns off the radio with a deep sigh.

*»It's a shame!« he says. »The Ombrone and Arno domains should have merged long ago! Today, everyone is doing their thing and no one is getting anywhere. On the other hand, tourism is booming on the island of Elba. And what do we get out of it? Nothing! The rich snobs sit over there on their island and are bored all day on the beach! They would love to make a few trips over to us. But how is that going to work as long as we can't offer any incentives to the tourist industry! When I was a little kid, thousands of tourists came to Siena every day! You can't imagine what it was like back then! Piazza del Campo was lined with bars, restaurants and ice cream parlors. And today? Dilapidated houses, a collapsed tower at the town hall and crime everywhere you look. No wonder no one wants to come there! The situation is similar in Florence and Pisa. The Leaning Tower has collapsed and lies in ruins in the Piazza dei Miracoli. The politicians in Florence, after the economic crash, sold off the paintings in the Uffizi to keep the population from starving.«*

*»Why is tourism booming on Elba, of all places?« Gianna wants to know. »They don't belong to any domain.«*

*»The islands are fine. For them, this shitty domain system has never been an issue. How could you divide an island into domains? Elba joined the Venetian Tourist Board many years ago. This made them, compared to us mainlanders, the island of the blessed. Due to their island location, the Albanians are effectively protected from their impoverished relatives and live in luxury thanks to the booming mass tourism from the rich domains. Ask your David how many times he has vacationed over there!«*

Gianna turns to her seatmate on the right and asks:

*»David, have you ever been to the island of Elba?«*

David startles, because his mind was completely elsewhere and he hadn't expected to be suddenly drawn into the two's animated conversation.

*»Have I been to Elba before? Yes, once, I think. It was a short vacation between two projects. But I don't remember it very well. Nice beach, clean water. You can visit the house where Napoleon lived. But I can not remember more.«*

Gianna turns back to Fernando DiSelva and nods with a sigh.

*»Yes, he has been to Elba.«*

*DiSelva continues: »If the domains of Arno and Ombrone were to join forces, we could once again build up a small tourism industry together. The Elbanians would certainly be happy to offer their guests a few day trips to Tuscany. It would be a win-win situation for all of us. At some point, we might be back on par with the Po domain and be able to move that cursed border fence further south.«*

*»Oh, and the regions further south should see where they stay?«  
Gianna asks.*

*»Everyone is their own person. Unfortunately, I have had to learn this lesson in my life. If this damned domain system hadn't been introduced, everything might have turned out quite differently. Now we just have to try to make the best of it.«*

There is not much talking in the cab of the tanker truck over the following kilometers. The good mood has evaporated all at once. DiSelva is busy dodging the many potholes that spread like bomb craters across the once well-built highway. The course of the road follows the course of the Arno River, which meanders slowly in the wide valley toward the sea. Sometimes Gianna has the impression that the river is moving faster than her slowly rocking truck. Towards afternoon they reach Pontedera.

*»Look girl!« says DiSelva after a long silence. »See those white buildings back there? Those are the halls of the old Piaggio factory! A few years ago they loaded all the production machinery onto trucks and shipped it to Genoa via Livorno. From there they went on to Turin and now they are producing their motorcycles there again as if nothing had happened. It's clear that we'll never catch up economically like that!«*

Gianna must think wistfully of her Vespa, which probably once saw the light of day here many years ago. Hopefully Marco will take good care of her. She wonders how Marco and Maria are doing. But before she gets even more homesick, she says:

*»Genoa, after all, seems to be an important hub for the Po domain.«*

*»Of course! The Po Domain only got back on its feet so quickly because they annexed the port of Genoa as a special economic zone. Genoa is only a few kilometers from the watershed. So what did the cities of Milan and Turin do? They negotiated with the Genoese and created a common economic region. In this way, the Po domain obtained an important oil port and Genoa was redeemed from its domainless existence as a coastal city. Just also a classic win-win situation.«*

Gianna thinks for a while and then turns to David.

*»Tell me David, is Trieste also such a special economic zone in your Danube domain?«*

*»Yeah, what makes you think that?« asks David, a bit puzzled.*

*»DiSelva just told me that Genoa is part of the Po domain, although the city is actually a bit behind the watershed. Is it the same with Trieste?«*

*»Yes, it's actually exactly the same thing. After the economic crash, the Danube domain had to deal with a huge problem: it was cut off from the global oil market. Other domains were much better off. The Rhine domain had Rotterdam, the Elbe domain had Hamburg, the Weser domain had Bremerhaven. They all had an efficient oil port at the mouth of their river system, through which they got their economies going again. Only we in the Danube domain were left behind. The Danube Delta is a huge nature reserve. The only port far and wide is Constanta on the Black Sea. And the existing infrastructure there would never have been sufficient to act as an oil port for the huge Danube domain. The solution to the problem was finally found in Trieste. This city is*



*located only a few kilometers from the watershed of the Danube domain. And what is even more important: From there, the transalpine pipeline already led across the Alps to the north directly into the Danube domain. So Trieste was integrated as a special economic zone and the small river systems of the Tagliamento and the Isonzo, where the pipeline runs, were integrated as well. From the moment the oil tankers docked in Trieste again and their cargo was pumped via the pipeline to the refineries in Schwechat and Ingolstadt, the economy suddenly started to pick up again!«*

Gianna begins to ponder. Could it be that her hometown of Rome never recovered only because it had failed to build a suitable oil port in time? The port of Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber would have been conceivably unsuitable for this purpose because of silting up. But what about Civitavecchia? The city was located away from the Tiber domain on a few insignificant creeks. The port had never regained its former importance after the economic collapse. Would Rome have gotten back on its feet economically if the city council had followed the example of the northern domains and formed an economic union with Civitavecchia? Had the Vatican once again had a hand in thwarting such a project because of its own power interests?

Gianna might think about conspiracy theories for a while longer, but then the sea suddenly appears on the horizon. Turquoise blue and smooth as a mirror, it lies before them. What a sight. Gianna loves the sea. She wistfully thinks back to the weekends when she used to go camping on the coast with her friends. The port facilities of Livorno can already be seen in the distance. Now it can't be long before they arrive at their destination.

The closer they get to the city center, the heavier the traffic becomes. DiSelva confidently makes his way. Obviously he's driven this route countless times before. When he reaches the Piazza della Repubblica, he drives a little further in the direction of the defiant Fortezza Nuova and then parks his monster truck in the middle of the large square.

*»Please wait here in the driver's cab! I'll be right back!«*

Then he gets out, walks toward one of the magnificent houses at the edge of the square and disappears inside. After five minutes, he comes out again, accompanied by a man. As the two walk toward the truck, Gianna examines the strange man. He must be a little older than DiSelva. At least his already completely graying hair makes him appear older. From his gait, however, he seems quite athletic and well-trained.

*»So my dears!« DiSelva says to Gianna and David as he opens the driver's door. »Let's move in together! We're getting down to business.«*

The strange man gets in first and squeezes into the seat next to Gianna. Then DiSelva follows him and closes the door.

*»Gianna, David, I want you to meet Alessandro! He will show you your accommodation in a moment and take you to the ship to Genoa tomorrow evening.«*

*Alessandro shakes hands with the two and says, »I hope you had a good trip!«*

*»Thank you!« replies Gianna. »We can't complain. On foot, we would certainly have been on the road for three or four days. So where are we going to sleep tonight?«*

*»At a cozy hostel in New Venice,« Alessandro replies. »But before that, unfortunately, we have to settle business matters. Fernando must have told you that when you arrive here in Livorno you must pay the second installment of twenty thousand Roman lire. Do you have the money with you?«*

Gianna gives DiSelva a questioning look, to which he immediately replies:

*»You can trust Alessandro one hundred percent. For him I put my hand in the fire.«*

*»Do I get a receipt?« Gianna asks cautiously.*

*»Sorry!« Alessandro replies, raising his eyebrows. »In our business, unfortunately, that's not common. You can't deduct our service from your taxes anyway. A receipt would only be worth*

*the paper it's written on. Our business is based on mutual trust, but I'm sure Fernando has already explained that to you.«*

With a deep sigh, Gianna pulls her T-shirt up a bit and undoes the Velcro fastener of the flat fanny pack in which she keeps her cash securely on her body. Under the gaze of David and Fernando DiSelva, twenty thousand hard-earned lire change hands. Alessandro puts the money in the inside pocket of his jacket and says:

*»When I take you to the ship tomorrow night, you should have the rest of the money counted out and ready in your pocket. I will say goodbye to you when you board the ship. Just before that, we will make the money transfer. And this should be done discreetly for your own protection.«*

*»Got it!« Gianna answers and nods in agreement.*

*»May I also give you some good advice?« DiSelva asks without waiting for the answer. »Stay in your hostel tonight and don't go out of the house. There's a lot of riffraff hanging around Livorno and especially at night you shouldn't go out on the streets!«*

*»I don't think we'll be getting into the city nightlife tonight,« Gianna replies dryly, thinking to herself: with what? »Are you still going back to Siena today?«*

*»No, for God's sake!« DiSelva replies and laughs. »I'm going to have a nice night on the town tonight. Tomorrow morning I'll drive to the fuel depot, fill my tanker truck to the brim, and then drive back. Driving across these roads at night with a truck full of gasoline? I'm not tired of living after all!«*

*»All right!« Alessandro says and looks at his watch. »Fernando, have a nice evening and a good trip! Thanks for bringing those two here safe and sound! See you again soon!«*

Then he urges them to get out. Before Gianna and David climb out of the driver's cab, they take their backpacks out from behind the seat. And only now do they see the modern rapid-fire rifle, which is makeshiftly attached to the back of the backrest.

## Bad news

*»Hi, I'm Domenico! And what's your name?«*

Jan has just made himself comfortable in the coach after departure and looks puzzled at his neighbor sitting on the other side of the aisle.

*»My name is Jan. I didn't know you speak German!«*

The young man who addresses him so abruptly from the side is none other than the priest from the Milan study group. As he sits there in his civilian clothes on the bus, nothing at all reminds him of his dignified appearance yesterday in the cathedral of Diyarbakir. With his curly blond hair, his soft features and his likeable, mischievous smile, he now looks more like a sonny boy and womanizer than a dignitary of the Catholic Church. Not even his priestly shirt with the collar has he put on today, but a washed-out T-shirt with the inscription "University of Milano".

*»My parents lived in South Tyrol for a long time. I grew up in Bolzano and speak German and Italian equally well.«*

*»How in the world did you get into this tour group? I thought you were all business students.«*

*»That's me too! I majored in theology and minored in business administration. Did you think the Catholic Church lived on faith and prayer alone?«*

*»I haven't thought about that yet,« Jan smiles, »but you're probably right. After all, the many properties and riches that the church has accumulated over the centuries have to be managed somehow. So what do you want to do for a living after you graduate?«*

*»That will become clear. Now I'll finish my doctorate and then I'll see what use my bishop has for me. What is the saying? The ways of the Lord are inscrutable! Do you already know where you want to work someday?«*

*»No, but I hope that in due course I will make the right decision myself. I think I would have a hard time if someone else tried to take this important decision away from me without asking me.«*

*»Yes, yes,« Domenico replies with a broad grin, »God gave man free will. But you should never forget: Man thinks and God directs!«*

Then he delves back into his thick book, which he obviously has with him to ward off emerging boredom. Jan has had enough of pious sayings for now and makes himself comfortable in his reclining seat. He pushes the backrest back as far as possible and tries to catch up on some sleep. Maybe he should have listened to his professor's advice after all and not spent the night in pointless discussions. While he dozes off with his eyes closed, the barren, brown steppe landscape of the Anatolian highlands passes by outside. After a while, the gentle rocking of the comfortable coach takes effect. Jan falls asleep and is rudely roused from his dreams three hours later when Rana blows loudly into the microphone of the coach's sound system.

*»We are about to reach the city of Şanlıurfa - or simply Urfa, as we locals call it. Urfa is a holy site of Islam and an important pilgrimage destination. According to legend, Abraham was born and lived here. Urfa is located on the edge of the fertile Harran plain. If you look out the side window on the right, you will see a huge dried-up canal. This was built at the time when Urfa was still part of the territory of Turkey. At that time, the Turks had dammed the Euphrates about one hundred kilometers from here with the Atatürk Dam to form a huge lake. Large quantities of Euphrates water were diverted to Urfa through two gigantic tunnel systems in order to intensify local agriculture. However, the dam project and irrigation proved to be highly problematic, and our caliph eventually decreed that the dam be torn down again.«*

*»Why?« one of the students from Paris calls out loudly to the front. »Irrigation is very important in this region, after all! What was so bad about the reservoir?«*

»The Turks pursued their own interests with the reservoir. The water that was consumed here in the plain of Harran was lacking for the population living downstream. The Turks didn't care because their national territory ended here. The caliph, of course, saw it from a slightly different perspective and wanted to see the available water distributed as fairly as possible throughout the river domain. But the intensive irrigation proved problematic for other reasons as well. The increased water supply raised groundwater levels throughout the plain and led to severe soil salinization. Where agriculture was once practiced that was adapted to the climatic conditions, atypical plant varieties, such as cotton, began to be grown that have extremely high water requirements. The Atatürk Reservoir was also an ecological disaster in other respects. Our guests from Cologne are certainly familiar with Lake Constance in their home domain. The artificially dammed lake covered an area one and a half times its size! Whole valley landscapes were submerged in the floods. Thousands of people lost their homes. It will take many decades for nature to recover from this experiment. On the edges of the reservoir, many slopes have slid away, leading to massive silting of the lake. The once fertile fields and many relics of prehistoric settlement now lie buried under a thick layer of sediment. However, safety concerns were the decisive factor for the deconstruction. We are fortunate that the dam has not been the target of an attack or damaged by a natural disaster in the past turbulent years. If this dam had ever broken and the contents of this gigantic lake had poured downstream, not one stone would have been left upon another there and a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions would have been the result. We are now approaching the city center and I would like to briefly tell you something about the program of the coming hours: in Urfa we will visit the bazaar, Abraham's carp pond and the Cave of Sorrows. Please take care of your valuables in the bazaar. There are unfortunately many pickpockets there.«

»No wonder,« Jan tells Domenico. »If agriculture is no longer as profitable because of the lack of water, you have to look for other business opportunities. I think it's really crass: first you spoil a region with fresh water in masses and then, when the population

*has gotten used to it, you just turn the tap off again! I think that the Caliph has not made many friends in this city.«*

*»Well,« replies Domenico, »the Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!«*

*»I guess you can find a Bible verse to fit any situation!«*

*»Well, here in Urfa everyone should actually know this saying. After all, the city is not only the birthplace of Abraham, but also of Job.«*

*"The one with the bad news?«*

*»That's the one! Job was a once respected and wealthy citizen of this city who honored God and prayed to Him regularly.«*

*»And what news did he spread?«*

*»You don't seem very Bible-thumping to me,« Domenico grins.  
»The devil made a bet with God that Job was only so pious and God-fearing because he was blessed with all imaginable wealth. God bet against it and harassed Job with all kinds of misfortunes. He lost his money, his livestock, and his ten children. One terrible message after another was delivered to Job. Even when he was stricken with sickness and misery, however, he held fast to faith and continued to praise the Lord. His wife eventually got fed up and tried to get him to curse God and end his meaningless life himself. This happened, by the way, in the Cave of Sorrows, which we will visit in a moment. Job, however, only said at that time, »We have accepted the good from God, should we not then also accept the evil?«*

*»At least God left him his wife!« Jan blasphemes.*

*»Who knows - perhaps Job would not have felt the loss as a punishment at all? The Bible does not say anything more about it. In any case, the devil lost his bet and Job was compensated for the inconvenience he had suffered. God gave him wealth and livestock again. And another ten children - to replace those who*

*had passed away. Basically, a classic happy ending that should give us food for thought!«*

»Well, well,« Jan thinks to himself. »That harmless-looking priest sure talks cynical for a Catholic clergyman.«

## **Cutpurse**

It is a beautiful evening in Livorno. The sun casts its last warm rays on the needle roof of the pines in the park of the Fortezza Nuova. The magnificently restored houses in the Piazza della Repubblica shine in the last sunlight. As Gianna and David leave the main square with Alessandro, however, the appearance of the buildings along the roadside changes abruptly. Livorno had been massively bombed during World War II and had lost a large part of its historic fabric forever. The new buildings are now also a hundred years old and in a correspondingly poor condition. In the post-war period, money and good building materials were scarce. Often there was sloppiness and bungling in the construction of the new houses. It is no wonder that many an old listed house is in better condition today than its new-fangled neighbor.

The three walk for a while along the canal, in front of the new fortress. It is called "New" only because there is a much older fortress at the harbor - the Fortezza Vecchia. As they cross the canal on a small bridge, Gianna is reminded of both Venice and Rome. Venice - because she knows many pictures of the famous lagoon city, which correspond exactly to the sight here. Rome - because the stench that hits their noses on the bridge inevitably makes her think of the Tiber. Apparently, all cities have the problem that the old sewage treatment plants no longer work and therefore any flowing - and unfortunately sometimes standing - water is abused as a cesspool.

Alessandro leads them to an unadorned four-story house directly on one of the canals. At the entrance to the house, one of the doorbells reads "Albergo". Otherwise, there is no indication that this house could be a hostel. The front door is open and Alessandro leads Gianna and David up



the narrow staircase to the second floor. There, too, an inconspicuous Albergo sign has been placed on one of the doors. At his ringing, the door opens and an old woman looks out. She recognizes Alessandro immediately and waves him and his companions in.

*»Gianna, David, this is Signora Malerba. She will take you in tonight. You don't have to worry about the payment. Everything has already been arranged. Tomorrow evening at five o'clock I will pick you up here again. You can do whatever you want all day long, but please be back on time! The ship to Genoa will not wait for you! Do you have any questions?«*

*»No,« Gianna replies. »We will wait for you here tomorrow at five o'clock.«*

*»Good! Then I wish you a good night and a nice stay in Livorno. See you tomorrow!«*

Alessandro says goodbye to the Signora and then leaves the house.

*»Snorer or non-snorer?« the signora asks kindly.*

*»Excuse me?« Gianna replies perplexed.*

*»I wonder if you or the young man snore? I have three bedrooms in my guesthouse. One is reserved for the snoring gentlemen so that the other guests can sleep in peace.«*

*»No, no!« Gianna laughs. »Neither of us snore.«*

*»Then please follow me! The room here next to the front door is my own private room. If you need anything, you can knock on my door anytime. There on the left is the snoring room, and across the hall is your sleeping room. The bathroom is down the hall. Please do not throw toilet paper in the toilet bowl, instead throw it in the trash can that is next to it. If you need anything else, you know where to find me.«*

The signora leads Gianna and David into the bedroom and then returns to her own living room. This bedroom is not particularly large. There is just enough room for three bunk beds, a small table and two chairs. The few

free spaces are occupied by the guests' backpacks and bags. The bunk bed on the window side of the room almost completely covers the right half of the window. Gianna and David occupy the still free bunk bed on the left wall.

*»Do you want to sleep upstairs or downstairs?« Gianna asks.*

*»I don't care.«*

*»Then I'll sleep upstairs. The air is better there!«*

A young couple is already lying on the bunk bed against the wall opposite and looks over at them curiously.

*»Hi. I'm Gianna and this is David.«*

*»Parlez-vous français?« asks the young woman in the lower bed.*

*»Uh - no. Do you speak english?«*

*»Yes we do.«*

David breathes an audible sigh of relief. At last they meet someone with whom they can talk in English. A language where someone doesn't have to translate back and forth all the time. It turns out that their names are Sylvie and Jacques and that they come from Arles in the Rhone region. They have been on the road with their bicycles for two weeks - always along the Mediterranean coast. They want to ride as far as Rome. Afterwards it is to go through the Apennines and the Alps again back to the Rhone. David truthfully tells them that he comes from Vienna, while Gianna prefers to keep quiet about her origins and pretends to live in Turin. Sylvie and Jacques, however, to their great relief, do not ask much, but talk extensively about the experiences of their bike tour so far. The two have also arrived today in Livorno, want to see the city tomorrow and then cycle further south the day after tomorrow.

In the third bunk bed, on the window side of the room, only the bottom mattress is occupied. Sylvie tells that a young man from the former

Switzerland has spread out his sleeping bag there, who is traveling as a backpacker. A somewhat strange, but quite funny fellow, who has probably gone to eat in the city at the moment.

*»You'll meet Reto soon,« Jacques says and continues with the description of his travel experiences: »I would never have thought that the coastal regions were doing so badly economically. The Rhone domain ends behind Toulon, which, like Montpellier and Marseille, still belongs to the Rhone estuary metropolitan region. Directly behind Toulon is the border fence. And behind it civilization ends! Saint-Tropez, Cannes and Nice are all just insignificant fishing villages. When you cycle past the dilapidated palaces along the waterfront promenades, you can still feel the glamor of times past. But the worst is Monaco! We took the precaution of giving the former principality a wide berth. The Grimaldis are said to have returned to the Mediterranean as pirates - just as their ancestors did. What else can they do? Their previous business model, which focused on tax evaders, high-society members and gamblers, has proven to be no longer viable. They have just remembered their core competencies again. In any case, we were glad when we got past the Rock of Monaco safely!«*

David listens with interest to the stories of the young couple. For Gianna, this kind of travel is just a particularly perfidious form of poverty tourism. These people would actually have enough money to enjoy themselves in one of the luxurious tourist resorts. Instead, they prefer to travel to the poor areas of the world in order to become even more aware of their great wealth. She has no sympathy for such a thing. Since her stomach is growling anyway, she says:

*»I'm going to go downstairs and get something to eat. Down the street I saw a little store. Maybe they have sandwiches or something like that.«*

David asks her to bring him something, too. Then he turns his attention back to Sylvie and Jacques. In his eyes, the two of them are very likeable roommates compared to all the other strange characters he had met on his

escape so far. He follows with great interest their talk about the impoverished domain-free places on the former French Riviera.

Gianna, meanwhile, buys a few sandwiches in the little store on the corner. On her way home, she notices a bold-looking young man. Rather Nordic in type. However, with blond, bleached, curly hair, a stubbly beard and a dark complexion, as if he had been exposed to the power of the southern sun for at least a year without protection. He walks a few meters ahead of Gianna in the same direction and disappears into the house where the hostel is located. As he climbs the stairs, he notices Gianna behind him and greets her with a Swiss-German »Salü«.

*»Are you Reto?« Gianna asks him in German.*

*»How do you know that?« the backpacker wonders.*

*»We live in the same room! My name is Gianna.«*

*»Very pleasant. My name is Reto, but you already know that.«*

Together they climb the stairs to the second floor.

*»Look who I brought with me!« Gianna says as she enters the room with Reto.*

In the following minutes, a linguistic confusion develops. Reto comes from Basel and grew up speaking German in the Rhine domain. In school, he had learned French as his first foreign language. It is obvious that he has a perfect command of this language when he talks to Sylvie and Jacques. With Gianna and David, he talks in his funny Swiss German dialect. And when all four have something to say, they do so in English. The couple from the Rhone tends to incessantly put themselves and their way of traveling in the foreground. Gianna is annoyed by their arrogance, but on the other hand she is happy not to be questioned. Reto seems to feel the same way. Gianna can't really figure him out. He must have been traveling with his backpack for quite a while. His next destination is apparently Sicily, where his ship will leave tomorrow morning. But he doesn't let out much about his route so far and his motives. Gianna almost

has the impression that he is also carrying around a secret, which he doesn't necessarily want to disclose to his casual acquaintances.

Around ten o'clock, the old lady comes into the bedroom and reminds her guests of the house rules of her boarding house. These rules state that from now on there is to be a good night's rest. The five prepare their sleeping bags for the night and then turn out the light.

Gianna quickly falls asleep. She dreams that she is already on the ship. But what kind of ship is it? An old sailing ship - a caravel<sup>28</sup> ! They are on the high seas and have been sailing for many days. Gianna stands at the railing and watches the dolphins. A whole shoal accompanies the ship. They jump out of the water and call something to Gianna - but she can't understand it. Suddenly the sailor in the lookout shouts: »Land in sight! Land in sight!« On the horizon, Gianna spots a white cloud that seems to be approaching fast. The captain begins to assemble an expedition crew. As he faces Gianna, he asks her in amazement, »What are you doing here? Do you even know who I am?« Gianna replies, »You are Amerigo Vespucci! Did you think I didn't know you?« The captain leaves her without a word and divides the other participants for the shore leave. Now it is getting louder and more hectic on the caravel. A one-eyed man in an officer's uniform comes running up and thrusts a musket into Gianna's hand, »Here - I hope you can handle this!« Gianna looks helplessly into his remaining eye and asks, »Can I have your eye patch in case you die in battle?« The officer shakes his head uncomprehendingly and keeps running. Suddenly Gianna finds herself in one of the dinghies being lowered into the water. She doesn't know at all how she got in there. The ropes squeak deafeningly as the little boat is lowered deeper and deeper. The moment it touches the surface, one of the dolphins emerges from the water and again calls out to Gianna those unintelligible sounds she already didn't understand at the railing. »I don't understand your language!« exclaims Gianna. The dolphin dives briefly, takes a running start and leaps over the dinghy in a mighty leap. Up on board the caravel, the captain yells, »Cast off! And remember,

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28 Caravel: Two- to four-masted sailing ship type of the 14th to 16th century

no prisoners will be taken!« Three dinghies break away from their mother ship and set course for a white sand beach. Black slaves sit at the oars, their feet inextricably bound to the bottom planks with chains. »At once! - At once!« the boatman yells. When they finally reach the beach, the crews jump out and pull the boats out of the water. The rowing slaves remain chained in the boats. Gianna also climbs out of the boat and wades barefoot through the warm shallow water. »What a great beach!« thinks Gianna. Is this an island? Is she on the mainland? Suddenly, countless natives come running out of the palm forest with loud battle cries. The entire expedition team rushes head over heels back into the boats and rows away as fast as they can. Only Gianna remains rooted to the spot on the beach and shouts to the natives: »Get lost! Go back to your forest! You have no business here!« A very angry looking chief with war paint stops in front of her and examines her from head to toe. At his command, two warriors approach. They tie Gianna hands and feet to a long pole and carry her away from the beach like a hunted prey. Gianna screams as loud as she can: »Let me go! I haven't done anything to you! Let me go!« But the warriors do not understand her and carry her through the palm forest to her village. It is a very small village. A few simple huts are grouped around a square with two large poles sticking out of the ground. A man is tied to one of the poles. »David, is that you?« exclaims Gianna as she is carried to the stakes. »There you are at last!« her friend calls back. »What took you so long?« The natives untie Gianna from the carrying wood and tie her to the second pole. An old medicine man peers out from one of the huts. He sees Gianna and walks resolutely toward her. »Did you bring it for us?« he wants to know from her. »What should I have brought you?« asks Gianna. But the medicine man turns away from her and disappears wordlessly into his hut. Gianna turns her head to David and asks him, »What does the old man want from us?« David, however, pretends not to have heard her question. Now four native women enter the square. Each of them carries on her head a sack full of branches. Carefully, they build a large pile of wood in front of Gianna's feet. »What are they doing?« cries Gianna to David. »It's your own fault!« he replies without looking at her. When the

women have finished their work, the old medicine man comes out of his hut again. He moves menacingly toward them. He holds a modern gas lighter in his hand. Slowly he moves it back and forth in front of Gianna's face and then sweepingly lets his black thumb roll over the ignition wheel. Gianna sees in his eyes the mirroring blaze of the flame. »Where did you get that lighter?« Gianna wants to know from him. Without answering her question, he bends down and sets fire to the branches at Gianna's feet. Desperately, Gianna tries to push the burning branches away with her toes. But the shackles are tied far too tightly for her to succeed. The flames lick higher and higher upwards. The smoke rises into her nose. The heat on her feet becomes more and more unbearable. She rears up and screams, »I don't want to die!«

Then she wakes up from her dream in a cold sweat. She needs a few seconds to realize where she is at all. Slowly her pulse goes down again. Livorno - she is in New Venice at the old signora's boarding house. She is lying in the upper bunk bed above David's bed. Outside the window, morning is already dawning. All is well. Everything is good?

Then she screams out loud. It is a scream that is sure to startle all the inhabitants of the house from their sleep.

*»I've been robbed!« she shouts across the bedroom.*

David jumps out of his sleeping bag and turns on the light in the room.

*»What's the matter?« he asks sleepily. »Did you have a bad dream?«*

*»All my money is gone! I had it at the bottom of my sleeping bag. Someone must have cut open my sleeping bag and taken it out!«*

Sylvie and Jacques have also woken up in the meantime and look irritatedly at Gianna's bare feet wriggling in the open at the end of the slit sleeping bag.

*»Where is Reto, by the way?« asks Jacques.*

*»He's probably already on his way to his ship to Sicily,« Sylvie says. »I think I heard him quietly leave the room while I was half asleep.«*

*»That pig!« Gianna screams. »That miserable pig stole from us! All the money we still have to pay to the escape agent, he stole from us!«*

## **Options for action**

Half-time - The tour group has already completed half of its bus trip through the Shatt al-Arab domain. Rana has just led her clients back to the bus after visiting the citadel of Kirkuk. Now the journey continues in the direction of Tikrit. The cities of Mosul and Erbil had been the stops of the previous days. Jan is fascinated to see how all these cities, ravaged by terror and war, have now been pacified, restored and blossomed into their former glory.

In the coach, the original seating arrangement has changed slightly. On the first few days, the Cologne tour participants had still stuck to their seats once taken, in good German fashion, as if they had made a binding seat reservation. In the meantime, however, the first signs of group dynamics have become apparent. Andreas sits less and less often in his original seat next to Jan. For the past two days, he has been conspicuously seeking closeness to Rana, and his interest is obviously not only in her expertise as a tour guide. As far as Jan can tell, however, Rana does not seem to be entirely averse to Andreas' advances either. One could say that between these two lovebirds, intercultural understanding is already working very well.

Natalie has moved to the front and had taken Andreas' empty seat next to Jan a few times. In the meantime, however, she has moved a few rows further forward to Professor Guggenmoser. Guggenmoser is well known for his appreciation of any form of charming female companionship, and Natalie apparently senses a unique opportunity to decisively improve the grade of her doctoral thesis with little effort.



Having lost his seatmate for the second time, Jan intensifies his contact with Domenico. Although Domenico's Bible verses sometimes annoy him, the two are somehow on the same wavelength. Jan finds the young priest increasingly likeable.

*»It's fantastic how this domain got back on its feet after the war!« says Jan, as the bus is just leaving the suburbs of Kirkuk behind.*

*»Yes, it is,« Domenico nods in agreement. »However, we must not disregard the fact that on this trip we will only get to see the chocolate side of the domain. We shouldn't believe everything unchecked that the governments try to sell us as truth!«*

*»Oh, Domenico, don't start with your religious quibbles again. You can see for yourself how things have turned out for the better here!«*

*»My dear Jan, I consider this domain system very critically and that has nothing to do with my faith or religion. What we get to see here is what the state propaganda wants to show us. Why don't we go to the west of the domain? I can tell you! Because there are still many unresolved conflict hotbeds smoldering there that we are not supposed to see. I just say Aleppo.«*

*»Is Aleppo also part of the Shatt al-Arab domain? I only know this city from the news broadcasts of my youth. It was almost completely destroyed in the Syrian war and most of the inhabitants had no other alternative than to emigrate.«*

*»Good question Jan! Does Aleppo belong to the Shatt al-Arab domain? The river domain system of your professor does not give a satisfactory answer to this! And exactly therefore nobody feels responsible until today for helping the people there! Aleppo lies at some insignificant river. But this river does not flow into the sea or anywhere else. It simply seeps away somewhere in the desert. To which domain would you assign it? One could now argue that if it were to carry a lot of water - so much that it could no longer seep away - it would eventually reach the Euphrates and also flow into the Shatt al-Arab. The caliph, however, vehemently resists this interpretation. He knows exactly what*

costs would then be incurred by his domain. Aleppo would have to be rebuilt and provided with a functioning infrastructure. In the past, Aleppo was artificially supplied with water from the Assad reservoir - and thus from the Euphrates. This water would then be missing downstream, and the reconstruction costs would be so enormous in view of the war damage that it would hit the state coffers hard. It is much easier to leave the city to its fate - domain or not.«

»It's a good thing we don't have such problems in Europe,« sighs Jan. »In our country - with very few exceptions - the affiliations of all cities are clearly defined.«

»So, does it bring us any benefits? In my homeland, this watershed crap only caused us problems many decades ago!«

»Excuse me?« Jan asks, almost choking. »When have you had problems in Italy in the past because of watersheds?«

»During the Second World War! Mussolini and Hitler had concluded the steel pact at that time. With devastating consequences for the South Tyrolean population!«

»South Tyrol, of all places!« When I was a kid, we often went down there for a long weekend. The absolute vacation paradise: Grandiose mountain landscapes, tourism in all four seasons, wine, fruit, sun and friendly people. The people there really have no reason to complain!«

»Oh, Jan, my grandparents - God rest their souls - would certainly see it differently! They had to experience the consequences of arbitrary border demarcations! After the First World War, South Tyrol was split off from Austria and assigned to Italy. The German-speaking South Tyroleans were, so to speak, forcibly Italianized. The consequences for the population were devastating. State officials were stripped of their posts and replaced by immigrants from other provinces. The German language was banned in schools and kindergartens. Italian was declared the sole official language. South Tyrol became Alto Adige.«

*»And what does that have to do with watersheds?« Jan wonders.*

*»When Hitler came to power in Germany, the South Tyroleans hoped that they, like many other German-speaking regions, would be reintegrated into the German Reich. Instead, Hitler and Mussolini hatched a plan that plunged all South Tyroleans into deep conflict. They were given a choice: They could either move to the German Reich, but in return they would have to leave their homeland forever - or they could stay in fascist Italy, but in return they would have to give up their German identity forever. Traitor to the people or traitor to the homeland - they had to choose between these two options.«*

*»Sounds like a choice between pestilence and cholera!«*

*»You could say that! Especially since no one could tell the South Tyroleans who were willing to emigrate where their new homeland would be. The most absurd regions were named, from Poland to Galicia to the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the population voted for the so-called option to become Germans. From then on, a deep rift went through society and also right through the individual families. At that time, my grandparents belonged to the group of the so-called optants. This meant that they were openly hostile to the group of Stay-at-homers, who, from the optants' point of view, had allied themselves with the fascists and wanted to seize the optants' property. However, the promises made to those who wanted to leave quickly turned out to be hot air. Most of the people did not even emigrate because of the war. Those who did emigrate either became cannon fodder in the German army or ended up in Austrian reception camps. In any case, the divisive wedge that had been driven between the two parties continued to have an effect for decades.«*

*»Did every South Tyrolean really have to make that decision back then?« Jan asks incredulously.*

*»Everyone! Except for underage children and married women. In their case, the man, as head of the household, made the binding decision for the whole family.«*

*»I still don't understand what all this has to do with watersheds, though!«*

*»Mussolini insisted that Italy's border should naturally run along the Reschen and Brenner Passes - and thus along the watershed between the Danube and Adige river systems. And Hitler, who urgently needed Mussolini as an alliance partner, accepted this. The fact that the South Tyrolean people were thus being pushed into the ground was of no interest to either of the two gentlemen. For this very reason, I find it irresponsible that we do not learn from history! The domain system of your professor has caused innumerable such constellations in the world and always it is some minorities who are the sufferers!«*

*»But that all happened ages ago!« Jan waves it off. »Time heals wounds at some point, and normality returns.«*

*»Maybe - but in any case not as fast as you think! This domain nonsense destroys the life of people! It did in the past and it still does today! Today, South Tyrol lies in a remote position in the small Adige domain and feels like an annoying appendix of the mighty neighbors from the Po. Only the inhabitants of the small Sesto valley were assigned to the same main domain as North and East Tyrol. And once again, an arbitrary demarcation has torn a people apart.«*

Jan notices how Domenico talks himself more and more into a rage and tries to calm him down a bit:

*»Domenico, the domain theory was a consequence of the great economic crash. Compared to the global financial catastrophe, the effects of the new border demarcations are harmless. The impoverishment of the population as a consequence of the collapse of the monetary systems was nevertheless much more serious, than the affiliation to any domain system! My family had to pay a high price also at that time. My father broke in the end at it. He committed suicide from pure despair!«*

Jan doesn't like to talk about this very personal topic. But he is getting fed up with Domenico's whining and wants to point out to him that he and his

ethnic group are not the only ones who have been wronged in the past. But the young priest's reaction is completely different from what Jan expects.

*»Suicide is a mortal sin in the eyes of the Catholic Church and nothing can justify it. I will pray for your father's soul. But when I think of the fate of my parents, I cannot feel much pity for your father! He threw away his life voluntarily and by his own decision. Do not expect from me any understanding for such an act.«*

Jan is thunderstruck. This Italian priest actually dares to drag his father's memory through the mud.

*»I don't expect anything from you! Except maybe a little respect for the dead! Or is that too much to ask?«*

Domenico's eyes narrow and his features, which were balanced and friendly a moment ago, suddenly look distorted with pain.

*»Your father ended his life of his own free will. My parents were brutally killed! I will never forget the sight of finding them both lying in their blood.«*

Tears well up in Domenico's eyes as he continues haltingly:

*»My father saw disaster coming long before the crash. When all the other people were chasing paper investments on the stock exchanges and in the financial markets, he invested his savings in gold and silver. Auri sacra fames - Cursed hunger for gold! But when the big crash came, he was as screwed as everyone else. One of the first laws decreed by the domain government on the Adige was a ban on private ownership of precious metals of any kind. My father should have given his valuables to the government for a ridiculous price. But he figured he could sit out the ban and hid his little treasure in the basement of our apartment building. In retrospect, this turned out to be fatal. When my mother, in the midst of the greatest need, could not get any more medication for her diabetes, he was forced to exchange a few of his gold pieces for insulin on the black market in Bolzano. In the process, he was observed by one of our neighbors. Since then, people whispered that Mr. Optant was*

*probably sitting on a secret stash of gold. It didn't take a month for the fate to take its course. When I was on a youth retreat at the weekend, unknown persons entered my parents' house and forced my father to hand over his gold. Afterwards they smashed my parents' skull with an axe. During the autopsy, eight broken fingers were found on my mother's body. The criminals had apparently tortured her in front of my father until they were sure that he had really told them all his hiding places. The perpetrators have not been found to this day.«*

Here Domenico's voice fails and he buries his face in his hands. Jan sits silently next to him and doesn't quite know how to act. The murder of Domenico's parents probably occurred around the same time as his father's suicide. Jan's shock was so deep that he can still remember every detail of those terrible days. How traumatized Domenico must have been by the crime against his parents!

## **Social decline**

*»Why did you put the money to the bottom of your sleeping bag?« David asks reproachfully.*

*»I've always had it on my body the past few nights,« Gianna replies. »By now, though, the belly pouch has made me sore. I was so terribly itchy that I took it off tonight and put it by my feet. I thought it would be safe down there.«*

*»Our money is still there, thank God!« Jacques triumphs. »I had it stashed under my pillow.«*

*»Why do you need money for an escape agent?« asks Sylvie in surprise. »You told us you were from Vienna and Turin! Have you done something wrong?«*

*»It's a long story and it really doesn't matter now!« Gianna replies indignantly. »David, what are we going to do now?«*

*»We can try to catch Reto still at the port,« he answers while already slipping into his pants.*

In no time at all they get dressed and leave the hostel.

*»Which way is the harbor?« Gianna asks as they stand on the street, which is still deserted at this time of day.*

*»In any case, not in the direction from which we came yesterday. Come on, let's run this way!«*

As fast as they can, they run along the road. After a few hundred meters, they cross a canal. Then they continue through the labyrinth of the old town. At a crossroads, a drunken man comes toward them, singing at the top of his voice.

*»Al porto?« Gianna calls out to him questioningly.*

The drunk points silently in the direction from which he has just come and then staggers on down the dark street, shaking his head. Gianna and David catch their breath briefly and then start running again. Finally, they see the walls of the Fortezza Vecchia appear at the end of the street.

*»There are fishing boats up ahead!« David shouts as they reach the waterfront.*

Gianna runs to one of the fishermen who is in the process of loading the previous night's catch onto a horse-drawn cart.

*»Where do the big ships leave from?«*

*»Over there by Monument of the Four Moors on the right!« The fisherman calls out to her and points south.*

Once again, Gianna and David take a quick breath and then run along the never-ending harbor promenade. They absolutely have to catch Reto before he is on the ship! After four hundred meters, they see the monument that the fisherman must have meant. Behind it, a bridge leads onto the extensive harbor area. When they have crossed the bridge, they reach a checkpoint and are stopped by a guard. Completely out of breath, Gianna asks:

*»The ship - the ship to Sicily - where does it leave? Please!«*

*»You should have gotten up earlier!« says the guard with an expression of regret. »The ship for Sicily left a quarter of an hour ago. You can still see the stern lights on the horizon!«*

All for nothing! Gianna sits down on the hard pavement, completely exhausted. Her lungs are burning and her heart threatens to burst at any moment. She stares blankly at the faint lights of the ship, of which soon only a faint plume of smoke will be visible. David rants his frustration off his chest: »Shit, shit, shit!« he shouts loudly into the silence of the dawning day, marching around in circles as if in a trance, stamping his foot on the ground at irregular intervals. The two only notice the guard again when he says in an encouraging voice:

*»In two weeks, there will be another ship bound for Sicily. Next time you'll have to set your alarm clock!«*

If there's one thing Gianna doesn't need at all at the moment, it's such well-intentioned advice. »Come on, let's go!« she says to David when she has caught her breath to some extent. With hanging heads, they leave the harbor area and walk back to the waterfront. Next to the Four Moors Monument, they sit down on a bench. When Gianna sees the four bronze figures at the base of the monument, they inevitably remind her of the black rowing slaves from her crazy dream. Maybe she's still dreaming! Maybe she's about to wake up and be back in Rome. Maybe it's all just a crazy nightmare. But a hard pinch in her thigh brings sad certainty: she is in Livorno, she is on the run and she is stranded. Without money and without any perspective on how to go on now. Slowly, the tension falls away from her and feelings pent up deep inside her break their way unhindered. Without warning, tears shoot into her eyes and she begins to sob unrestrainedly. David, on the other hand, has fallen into a state of shock. Only his masculinely conditioned protective instinct commands him to take this howling heap of misery in his arms.

*»Don't hang your head!« he says in a low voice. »We've come this far. We'll find a way out now, too!«*



*»How? Without money? I think you have no idea what it means in our domains to be without family, friends and money!«*

*»No, I haven't either. But I haven't seen anyone starve yet either!«*

*»Wait and see what it means to have to live on handouts!«*

*»Oh come on, it won't be that bad!«*

*»Just look at this monument! How they even glorify the forcible deportation of African migrants on their waterfront. You can imagine how much they'll welcome us into their city when they realize we don't have one lira left in our pockets!«*

As far as the xenophobia of Livorno's inhabitants is concerned, Gianna is not entirely wrong. The southern domains have been so overrun by the influx of African refugees in recent decades that not much of the famous Italian hospitality remains. As for the four Negroid bronze figures, however, Gianna is mistaken. These were already established in the seventeenth century and represent not - as one might assume at first glance - deported Africans, but captured pirates.

*»Let's go back to the hostel!« David suggests. »There's nothing more we can do here right now anyway.«*

Meanwhile, in the Albergo, everyone is awake. The Signora was informed by Sylvie and Jacques that there had been a theft from her guesthouse. However, due to her lack of French and English, she hadn't understood much as her excited guests talked wildly at her. Looking at the slashed sleeping bag, however, she was able to figure out a lot of things on her own. Nevertheless, she is glad when Gianna explains to her in Italian what has happened.

*»I was suspicious of this young man right from the start,« she finally says. »Have you already spoken to Alessandro about this incident?«*

*»No,« Gianna replies. »He doesn't want to pick us up until tonight. Do you know where we can reach him?«*

*»If you want, I can call him and let him know to come over. Maybe he can bail you out somehow after all.«*

*»Oh Signora Malerba, you surely know that we wanted to use the money to pay for our escape to the north. Do you think he wants to have anything to do with us now? Now that we are completely penniless?«*

The old woman takes Gianna's hand and tries to calm her down a bit:

*»Child, I can't tell you that either. But Alessandro is a good boy deep in his heart. You two can definitely stay here with me for the next few days. Don't worry about that for a while!«*

*»Thank you very much, Signora! I don't know how to make it up to you!«*

*»How do you know that the young man is really on his way to Sicily by ship? Just because he told you that doesn't mean it's true! He who steals also lies.«*

*»You mean he might still be in Livorno?«*

*»Yes, it is possible! Maybe ask the people in town if anyone has seen him. With his blond hair, he might have caught the eye of one or two people after all.«*

While Gianna is talking to the signora at the reception, David turns to Sylvie and Jacques in the bedroom, looking for help:

*»Can you perhaps help us out of this predicament? We need 25,000 Roman lire for our escape agent. In the hard currencies of the Danube and Rhone domains, that is not so much. I would transfer the money plus interest back to you immediately, as soon as I am back in Vienna!«*

*»Can you please tell me why you, as a national of the Danube domain, need an escape agent?« Jacques asks in an aggressive tone.*

*»They stole my papers and that's why I can't get across the border of the Po domain. Besides, they framed me in Rome for something I didn't do. They would surely deport me there again!«*

*»Then contact the nearest embassy in your domain! If what you claim is true, they would help you immediately!«*

*»There is no embassy here for miles! Besides, I have been officially declared dead. Nobody would believe me! My only chance is to come to Vienna and prove my identity there.«*

*»I don't believe a word you say! Declared dead - who knows what you've really been up to!« Jacques replies with an evil look.*

*And Sylvie goes one better: »You don't have to believe that this is not much money that you want from us. You may think that we in the North are all swimming in money. But that's not true! We have to turn over every bill twice before we spend it, just like you down here. How long do you think we had to save up for this trip!«*

*»Don't act so mendacious!« David replies angrily. »With the money I pay every month for my apartment in Vienna, I could easily live down here for a year in luxury! You really don't need to take the piss out of me!«*

*»If you're as rich as you pretend to be, surely you'll find a solution to your problems!« Jacques replies and turns away from David in disgust.*

For him and Sylvie, the topic is over. David also no longer feels like begging these arrogant snobs. Let them choke on their money! He leaves the room and goes to Gianna, who is still talking to the old lady at the reception.

*»David, the Signora has a good idea! Who says that this Reto really went to Sicily by ship? Maybe he's still here in town! We'll just ask people if anyone has seen him!«*

A minute later, Gianna and David are back on the street. In the meantime, life has come to the streets of the old town. For two hours they walk

through the entire city center and Gianna asks countless passersby if they have seen a tall man with a stubbly beard and long straw-blond hair. A few even claim that they had seen someone matching this description, but that had already been yesterday and that Reto had been hanging around the city yesterday was already known to her. When they get near the harbor again, David says:

*»We are stupid! Let's ask people here if anyone saw him go on the ship this morning!«*

At the checkpoint of the port area, there is still the same man they already know. He also recognizes Gianna and David immediately:

*»Well, have you changed your minds? Where are you going this time?«*

*Gianna asks him, »Did a tall man with blond hair come by here very early this morning?«*

*»With a big green backpack on his back? Yes, he wanted to get on the ship to Sicily! Your friend obviously got up on time, unlike you!«*

Now they finally have certainty. Reto has run off with the money and nothing in the world can bring him or the money back. Discouraged, they go back to the hostel.

*»Maybe I can persuade Jacques and Sylvie to advance us the money after all,« says David. »They were pretty dismissive earlier, but I can try again.«*

But when they arrive at the hostel, the couple from Arles has already left. Apparently, their ideas of a carefree vacation were incompatible with the misery of the southern population that is openly revealed here. Instead, however, they meet their escape agent Alessandro, who is having a heated exchange of words with the old signora. When he sees Gianna, he immediately hisses angrily at her:

*»Do you know the trouble you have caused me by your recklessness?«*

*»Why have we been reckless?« Gianna defends herself. »You're the one who put us up in that den of thieves!«*

*»Leaving all the money in the sleeping bag! How stupid can you be? I've got a lot of trouble on my hands because of you! Your escape was perfectly prepared and now I have to call it all off again!«*

*»Will we at least get our deposit back?« Gianna asks cautiously.*

*»Are you crazy? Do you think the money only goes to me? Do you have any idea what kind of effort goes into such an illegal transport of people? How many documents have to be forged and how many people have to be bribed? Here in Livorno, in Genoa, in Trieste, at the customs, at the railroad company! Do you think I can now apply for a refund everywhere and get my money back? I think you are dreaming! Due to the failure of the last installment, I am now stuck with a huge loss! And now you stupid chick come along and want your deposit back!«*

*»But what are we supposed to do now?« Gianna asks, increasingly desperate.*

*»How should I know? That's your problem! I've got enough trouble on my hands because of you!«*

*»Can we work off the damage, then? Can we work off the money?«*

*»You want to go to work for me?« Alessandro repeats the question and looks at Gianna contemptuously. »In principle, I would already have use for a woman your age. But look at you! With your short hair, every suitor immediately thinks that he will get head lice from you. Perhaps one or the other African would perhaps still have mercy! But with the money they are willing to pay, you can spread your legs until old age and still haven't earned the passage to Genoa!«*

*»Alessandro, that's enough!« the old signora interferes. »The young girl really has enough trouble on her hands already. You don't have to insult her now, too! You have strained my hospitality enough. It's better if you leave now!«*

*»Excuse me!« Alessandro rows back a little. »I didn't mean it that way. But you guys really need to understand my situation! Everyone thinks we escape helpers are all money-hungry felons. But nobody wants to admit what a huge organizational effort is behind this business! This view is naive and completely misses the reality!«*

*»Maybe we can really make ourselves useful to you. I speak English and German in addition to Italian. My friend even speaks Arabic! I also know a little bit about computers. I am a trained journalist. In Rome, I ran a video blog! David is even a studied IT expert! In his home country he programmed banking software!«*

Alessandro only half-heartedly listens to the suggestions of the desperate young woman. The last two sentences, however, clearly catch his attention.

*»Ask your friend if he knows anything about this new Linux kernel 18.3!«*

Gianna translates this question into German for David. He looks puzzled, but then answers:

*»We no longer officially use any open source software at the bank. But of course I'm still very familiar with Linux! What's the point of this question?«*

Gianna translates David's answer back into Italian. Alessandro thinks for a moment and then says:

*»Maybe there is a way out for you guys after all. My son is responsible for all the IT stuff in our organization. Since the last software update, however, nothing works on our systems anymore. The boy has been desperately trying to get the software working again for days. But I'm afraid we have a real problem with skilled workers at the moment. Come to our office at the Piazza della Repubblica this afternoon. Here is my card - it has*

*our exact address on it. We'll see if we can find a use for you after all!«*

## **Opium Cave**

Jan Eckert's study trip is drawing to a close. An intensive two-day workshop on the campus of the university in Baghdad ended this afternoon. Directly afterwards, the joint closing dinner took place. The professors of the host university and of the three travel groups praised in exuberant speeches the successful course of the study trip and emphasized the necessity of a further intensive cooperation of all participating faculties. The rest of the evening was at the free disposal of the tour participants.

Jan, Andreas and Natalie have joined Rana, Hassan and Layla. Hassan works as a junior lecturer at the Chair of Applied Limnology<sup>29</sup>, and Layla is the right-hand woman of the chair holder in the secretariat there. The two are obviously involved with each other. They both speak some German, but not nearly as perfectly as Rana. They apparently hope that contact with foreign guests will improve their foreign language skills. Slowly and full of food, the six of them stroll along the wide promenade along the Tigris River, as Rana suggests:

*»Let's go to the opium den!«*

The three Cologne residents look at each other in amazement and can't believe their ears.

*»Oh, yes!« Layla and Hassan exclaim as if from the same mouth.*

Rana speeds up and turns from the wide promenade into a narrow side street.

*»You don't have to be afraid,« she reassures her guests, »the Opium Den is a hip student bar. Everything that goes on there is completely legal!«*

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A little later, however, when they enter the gloomy basement pub, Jan begins to have slight doubts about the seriousness of this establishment. The light in here is dim and the air is cutting. The scent of the thick clouds of smoke wafting through the low vault is unmistakable: this is a place to smoke pot. Hassan heads purposefully for one of the last free sofas. The whole place is a collection of sofas and heavy upholstered armchairs grouped around several low tables. Apart from the yellow lampshades, all the furnishings are in various reddish hues. Pillows, rugs, sofas - everything in pink, purple, light or dark red. Jan can't remember ever having been in a comparable place. But probably the rhinish fire safety regulations would prohibit such furnishings anyway. They have hardly taken their seats when a waiter comes hurrying over and puts cookies, tea and sweets on the table. Hassan talks to him briefly in Arabic. The waiter only nods and disappears again with a broad grin on his face.

*»Is the use of drugs allowed here?« Andreas asks with an incredulous face.*

*»That depends on how you define drugs!« replies Rana with a laugh. »Here in Baghdad, for example, alcohol is absolutely taboo. The Qur'an basically forbids any form of intoxicant unless it's used as medicine. This, of course, opens up a certain amount of discretion. In practice, the situation in our country today is that hard drugs such as heroin or opium are strictly forbidden, but the use of cannabis is legal. But I think you can smell that yourself!«*

*»Is it true that you are allowed to buy alcohol in supermarkets in Germany?« Layla asks curiously.*

*»No - but only because there is no Germany anymore! But all joking aside. With us in the Rhine domain it's actually like that and in the other German-speaking domains as far as I know too. You just have to be of age! No alcohol is allowed to be sold to children in our domain.«*



*»At least in theory!« adds Andreas. »I can still remember when I was fifteen. My buddies and I used to get booze when we got rowdy on the weekends.«*

*»What did you got?« Hassan asks in amazement.*

*»We were getting drunk.«*

*»Back then, we called it binge drinking,« Natalie adds with a laugh. »We also had no problem getting alcohol when we were teenagers. Either you knew someone who was already eighteen and got the stuff for you, or you shopped where the salesman didn't look too closely.«*

*Hassan says, »I believe that every society needs to legalize some form of drug use. People need an outlet from everyday life. In my opinion, that's perfectly okay. Sure, there are always some people who know no limit or measure and slip into addiction. But that's no reason to demonize all drugs in general!«*

A lively discussion develops about the pros and cons of drugs, the consequences of alcohol abuse, the livelihood needs of opium poppy and coca farmers, and the protection of youth and unborn life. The heated exchange of positions and arguments only calms down when the waiter returns and places a large hookah on the table. Hassan and Rana make a start. They inhale heavily a few times until the pipe is well smoked. The Cologne guests watch the action with fascination and listen to the rhythmic bubbling of the air in the bulbous glass body of the pipe. Then the tube with the mouthpiece makes the rounds. »Wow!« thinks Jan. This is quite a difference from the dry stuff he had smoked like this in his younger years in the shisha bars of Cologne. The aromatic, mild smoke feels good right away and creates a feeling of comfort and calm in him after just a few puffs.

*»So what did you like best on your trip?« Layla asks curiously.*

*»I found the last few days in Basra the most interesting,« Natalie replies. »And the best thing there was the guide who showed us the city and the oil port!«*

»You must have a thing for older gentlemen!« Andreas teases her, alluding to Natalie's relationship with Professor Guggenmoser.  
»That tour guide could easily have been your grandfather!«

»Nevertheless, I thought he was totally good! What he has already experienced in his life! First the time before Saddam Hussein, then the time under his dictatorship, the Gulf wars, the decline of the city and now its rebirth, so to speak. I found it all totally exciting and authentic!«

Rana replies: »The Basra you saw has actually only existed for a few years! What do you think how much money has gone into the reconstruction of this city, so that it became again what it was once: The Venice of the Orient. You can not imagine what conditions prevailed there in the past! The city was completely filthy and run down. If anything came out of the dried-up taps, it was salt water. Electricity was rare. The population lived in complete poverty without any perspective. The only business that was still going on was the kidnapping of supposedly rich people. And for the youth there was only a future as fighters in one of the many private militias.«

»But the oil business should have brought money into the city!« Andreas wonders.

»But it didn't! The oil port at the Shatt al-Arab has generated immense wealth for decades, but none of it has ever reached the local population. In Saddam's time, the money was squandered by him and his minions, and after the Gulf War, the new rulers and the corrupt Iraqi government feasted on it. For the inhabitants, only the dirt and the stench fell off. The oil business was completely in foreign hands and the few specialists who kept the business going were also from abroad. Basically, it was not surprising that the population specialized in kidnapping one or the other of them and letting them run again for ransom. The only alternative was to join a militia and put one's life on the line in the fight against IS. It took our caliph to ensure that the city and its population received a fair share of the profits generated from oil exports. Since then, Basra has been booming again as never before. The fact that we had such an old guide is simply because

*none of the young people have the time to show foreigners like you around the city. We are glad for every volunteer at the moment!«*

Rana lectures for quite a while about the former catastrophic conditions in the city of Basra. At some point, however, no one wants to hear anything more about the horrors of the past. From then on, the conversation turns back to more trivial topics like music, movies and computer games. The dubious contents of the hookah bowl have meanwhile developed their intoxicating effect on each of the six smokers. Jan would love to know what else is in there besides flavorings and tobacco. The stuff must be pretty strong! His body feels as if he's floating on the sofa. Like on a cloud. Sometimes it is difficult for him to follow the conversations of the others. At some point he realizes that Natalie is talking to him like a monologue and telling him her life story. As if in a trance, he nods from time to time, without interrupting her constant babbling flow of words even once. Andreas and Rana have snuggled deep into the cushions on their sofa. Giggling and smooching, they hardly notice what is going on around them. Only now and then do they take a deep drag from the hookah before turning back to their lovemaking. The situation is hardly any different for Hassan and Layla. The two have meanwhile lapsed back into their national language and have lost all interest in their guests. After a second hookah has been smoked out, Jan announces that he has reached the necessary bedtime and wants to go back to the hotel. The others follow his suggestion, albeit rather reluctantly.

*»It's not very far from here to the hotel,« Rana explains when they are back on the street. »Please follow me - I'll take you there!«*

Hassan and Layla say goodbye and shortly thereafter disappear into the darkness. Rana takes Andreas by the hand and walks quickly in the direction where, according to Jan's sense of direction, the Tigris flows. In the fresh air, his spirits slowly return. The drug is still working tirelessly in his head. At least he can walk and feels halfway lucid again. Unfortunately, it's a different story for Natalie. At the beginning she had

big problems to keep up with Rana's pace. And when she finally finds her way back to a normal pace, she starts talking to Jan again with her Armenian childhood stories. Thank God, after a while the brightly lit facade of the hotel appears in front of them. In front of the hotel entrance, Andreas detaches himself from Rana's hand, goes to Jan and whispers in his ear:

*»See you at breakfast! I'm going to spend the night at Rana's tonight. You have the room to yourself!«*

Jan grins to himself. He had already thought that the two of them would not want to say goodbye to each other here and now. But before he enters the hotel lobby with Natalie, Rana comes rushing over.

*»I wish you a safe journey home! I hope you enjoyed your time in our domain. Take care! Maybe we will see each other again someday!«*

She hugs Jan and Natalie briefly, takes Andreas by the hand again and disappears with him in the direction of the Tigris promenade. Jan and Natalie look after them briefly and then enter the hotel. The night porter at the front desk greets them with a friendly »Good Evening!« and then turns his attention back to the game on his smartphone. As the two get into the elevator, Jan asks:

*»I live on the fifth floor. Where do you have to go?«*

*»Into the Fourth.«*

After the elevator starts moving, Natalie looks deeply into Jan's eyes and then asks somewhat bashfully:

*»Tell me, is it true that you don't care about women?«*

Jan smiles at her and answers:

*»Why are you interested? But anyway - yes that's right! Do you have a problem with that?«*

*»Oh, what - I just heard that once and thought I'd ask you!«*

In the meantime, the elevator has reached the fourth floor. Natalie wishes Jan a good night and gets off. But no sooner has she left the elevator than she suddenly makes another U-turn and steps into the light barrier to prevent the door from closing.

*»Do you know where Guggenmoser has his room?«*

*»Right next to me. Room 528. We went up together after checking in, that's why I know it so well. Anything else you want to talk to him about today?«*

*»Nope - I'm just curious,« she answers and smiles uncertainly.*

Then she gives Jan a kiss on the cheek and steps out of the light barrier. When Jan enters his room on the fifth floor, he first goes to the balcony door and lets in some fresh air. The day had been hot and stuffy, and the stale air of his hotel room smells the same. »Unbelievable how fast these two weeks have gone by,« Jan thinks to himself as he steps out onto the balcony and looks down, fascinated, at the barges passing below on the Tigris River. »Tomorrow night I'll be back in wintry Cologne freezing my ass off!« Deeply he draws the fresh evening air into his lungs, as if he could use it to expel the last remnants of nicotine and cannabis from his body. The leaden tiredness that had afflicted him at the end of his visit to the pub has disappeared again. After a quarter of an hour, Jan closes the balcony door again and looks at the clock. It's only ten - clearly too early to go to bed already! He reaches for the TV remote control. The first thing that appears on the screen is a warning that the hotel guest using the TV might be confronted with lewd images that do not conform to the rules of Islam. Jan confirms that he has taken note of the warning and zaps from one channel to the next. Suddenly, he can't believe his eyes. His home station appears on the screen: New Rhenish Wave. Apparently, the Cologne-based broadcaster now also transmits its program via satellite and can thus also be received in the Middle East without any problems. Amused and curious, Jan follows the current news program and realizes at the end that not much new has happened during his absence. 1.FC Cologne

is still leading the Rhineland league and a new food scandal is once again worrying the population. Just as he is about to zap on again, he suddenly hears a noise:

*»Boom - boom - boom«*

As if someone in the next room knocked on his wall with an object.

*»Boom - boom - boom - boom«*

The knocking sounds are repeated every second, and they even seem to increase in frequency and intensity. The knocking is clearly coming from the right wall. His professor is sleeping over there! Has something happened to him? Does he need help?

*»Boom - Boom - Boom - Boom«*

But before Jan rushes across the hotel corridor to the neighboring room to ask his professor if he's okay, he carefully puts his ear against the thin wall. The blows are now hammering directly into his eardrum. During the breaks, however, Jan can now clearly hear a voice:

*»Yes - yes - oh - oh - yes - yes - yeeeeees!«*

The voice is clearly female and moaning with lust. »You've got to be kidding me!« thinks Jan. »That dirty old man over there is fucking a hooker and has his bed so awkwardly positioned against the wall that the bed frame transmits every one of his thrusts directly to my wall!«

*»Boom - Boom - Boom - Boom«*

The moaning of his bedmate has become so loud in the meantime that Jan can now hear it clearly without holding his ear to the wall. »That's not true!« Jan suddenly realizes. »That's Natalie!« Of course, that would explain why she asked Jan for the professor's room number in the elevator. After Jan has given her the cold shoulder, the professor now has to serve as a stopgap! In this way, she combines the pleasant with the useful. Her doctoral thesis hasn't been doing very well lately anyway, and one could see her sucking up to the professor all along the way in order to improve

her chances of getting a halfway good grade. Now, apparently, one thing leads to another: Motivated by her career and aphrodisiaced by the drugs, she sweetens the last evening for herself and her boss! Jan is curious to see what she'll be like tomorrow morning when the effects of the drug have worn off and all that's left is a hangover and bruises from the hot night with her professor.

»On the other hand,« Jan thinks to himself, »maybe I'm doing Natalie an injustice.« Maybe the professor really did order a hooker from room service. As often as he's been here in Baghdad, he's probably already very familiar with the local possibilities and knows who to contact here.

Jan turns up the TV and hopes to drown out the uproar next door. Fortunately, the ramming reaches its climax shortly afterwards with a final bang against the wall and peace returns. Jan turns the volume of the TV back down to room volume. As he continues to zap, he has meanwhile reached the porn channels. Finally, he gets stuck on one of the gay channels and watches the scenes in frustration.

*»Boom - boom - boom,« it goes again behind the wall shortly thereafter.*

»That can't be true! First Andreas and Rana! And now Guggenmoser and Natalie! Did they all just come here to fuck?« Jan desperately reaches for the remote control and turns up the volume again.

*»Boom - boom - boom - boom«*

Jan has no choice but to witness again live how the dirty old man from next door penetrates the body of a willingly screaming woman with rhythmic thrusts of his academic faculty. Jan thinks of home, thinks of his family and thinks of his friend Kevin. »One more day - one more day I have to hold out - then I'll be home again!« Now the drug in his head comes back again. His thoughts jump around aimlessly, like startled springboks in the hot African savannah. And also the hot porn scenes on the TV slowly start to have their effect.

*»Boom - boom - ring - ring!«*

What is it? Now the phone on the nightstand starts ringing too!

*»Here Jan! What's up?«*

*»It's me - Domenico. I can't fall asleep and thought I'd give you a call. How are you spending your last night here?«*

*»Don't ask! You don't want to know what's going on next door!«*

*»Do you want to come by my place? I have a quiet single room, number 502.«*

*»Is this some kind of indecent offer?«*

*»What does indecent mean? The Catholic Church is not a stranger to human weakness. And the penitent is forgiven much! Besides, there is a saying: What happens in Baghdad, stays in Baghdad - or something like that.«*

*»Oh Domenico - you and your Bible verses!«*

Jan hangs up the phone, gets some condoms from his suitcase and leaves his room.

## **Assessment Center**

The bells at the cathedral are just striking three o'clock when Gianna and David enter the office of the tourist agency "FXC". Their previous suspicions that their escape helper Alessandro could possibly be the head of the entire smuggling ring are quickly confirmed. The secretary in the anteroom asks them to take a seat in the hallway for a moment, as their boss is taking part in an important conference call and does not want to be disturbed. Gianna and David settle down on two comfortable leather armchairs and can't stop marveling. From their visits to Fernando DiSelva's filthy gas station office in Siena, they didn't have too many expectations of the local place. All the greater was their amazement at the prestigious surroundings in which their escape agent resided. Even from



the outside, the building had made a good impression. In contrast to the streets of the old town, where the decay of the buildings is everywhere unmistakable, in the elaborately restored palaces around the Piazza della Repubblica apparently everything has settled that has rank, name and money. The FXC agency covers the entire top floor of this four-story palazzo. Six offices branch off to the left and right from the wide, white marble-tiled corridor. Opposite the visitors' corner, right next to the door to the executive office, in a gold-colored frame, hangs a large black-and-white portrait from which an elderly woman looks down on visitors with a kind face. "Franziska Xaviera Cabrini <sup>30</sup>1850-1917" has been engraved on the frame. FXC - David assumes that the lady, must be one of Alessandro's ancestors, to whom the foundation of the agency probably goes back.

Over a cup of cappuccino, kindly brought to them by the secretary, Gianna and David wait for Alessandro's conference call to end. After half an hour, the door to his room finally opens:

*»I apologize for taking a little longer. I had some important business to take care of. Please come with me!«*

He leads them to a room at the very end of the long corridor. Amidst several computer screens, a young man of about twenty sits there and looks at them expectantly.

*»Gianna, this is my youngest son Lorenzo. I have already told him about your friend David. Lorenzo speaks English quite well, so communication between the two should not be a problem. If your David is really as much of a computer genius as you claim, hopefully he will have our computers working again by tonight. Lorenzo will support him as best he can. I myself have a lot of other things to do, unfortunately. Besides, I don't know much about this computer stuff. So please contact Lorenzo with all your questions. I wish you a lot of success!«*

Having that said, Alessandro leaves the three young people alone. Gianna briefly translates Alessandro's expectations for David before the conversation between the three switches to English.

*»What exactly is your problem?« David wants to know from Lorenzo as he takes a seat next to him in front of one of the screens.*

*»I applied a software update to our server last week. Since then, all our workstations can no longer connect to the Internet. No more mail, no more data backup, simply nothing works! I have been trying for days to find the cause of the error. So far however unfortunately unsuccessfully.«*

*»Did you guys have a working internet connection before?«*

*»Yes, of course! We have our own power generator on the roof of the house and a powerful IoS system<sup>31</sup>. It all worked wonderfully. It has something to do with the networking of the individual computers. I have already checked everything. It doesn't seem to be due to the wiring.«*

*»Can I log into your server's console?«*

*»Yes, here take!« says Lorenzo, pushing the computer keyboard and mouse in David's direction.*

*»Can you please enter the root password,« David asks after starting the console program.*

He demonstratively turns away from the screen. »Click - click - click - clack,« it makes on the keyboard. David would bet that this amateur administrator has just pressed "fxc - enter". In any case, his administrator password consists of only three letters and is thus highly insecure. At the moment, however, he doesn't feel like hacking any credentials. His hunting instinct has been awakened! David is on the hunt for the cause of an error in a computer system. After a short time, he is no longer aware of his surroundings. He scrolls through man pages on the screen<sup>32</sup>, changes

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<sup>31</sup> IoS: Internet over satellite

<sup>32</sup> Manpages: Collection of help and documentation pages of the Linux operating system.

configuration files and downloads software packages. His fingers race across the keyboard, while Lorenzo, with his mouth open, tries in vain to halfway comprehend the system corrections that have been made. After half an hour, David restarts the server and asks Lorenzo to test from a neighboring computer whether the fixes have had any effect.

*»I'm going crazy!« the young administrator cheers. »Now it's working again! How did you do that?«*

*»Well. You had a problem with the network cards on your workstations. In the new Linux kernel, there is a bug in the detection of this quite antiquated type of card. The bug is already known and will probably be fixed in the next kernel version. I have applied a patch and adjusted the configuration files of the driver software so that the bug is not fixed, but at least worked around on your systems.«*

Lorenzo and Gianna look at David as if he had just read from the Koran in Arabic. The reverent silence is abruptly interrupted, however, when the secretary at the other end of the hall lets out a loud cry of joy:

*»Hooray! I'm getting back on the Internet!«*

A minute later, Alessandro stands beaming in the computer room and says:

*»Well, that went faster than I thought! Congratulations! Now what was the problem?«*

Lorenzo tries to reproduce in Italian, as best he can, the diagnosis he has just received from David in English. But even Gianna, who didn't understand the least bit of David's lecture, doesn't miss the fact that the original and the translation don't have much to do with each other. Alessandro is not particularly interested in technical details anyway. He closes the door and sits down on the last free chair in the room.

*»Listen up girl! Your boyfriend really seems to have a lot going for him. I actually have a job for you two to earn transportation to the Danube Domain. Are you guys interested?«*

*»All the way to Trieste or really beyond the border of the Danube domain?«*

*»All the way to the Danube domain, as far as I am concerned. The crossing from the station in Trieste over the domain border is really not the problem we have to discuss for a long time. I'd rather tell you what your job is all about! The issue is the following: Our refugee aid organization has been cooperating with a few similar organizations in the Mediterranean region for quite some time. At the moment, we all work relatively self-sufficiently and independently of each other. This means that each of us maintains a more or less extensive database of escape routes, transport companies and bribe recipients. In addition, we receive daily updated information about tightened border controls, raids, uncovered escape routes, unreliable cooperation partners and so on. We therefore want to join forces in the future by setting up an escape assistance portal on the darknet, where we can enter and retrieve the information we have collected. I expect your friend David to set us up with that system in the coming weeks. He will be working with Lorenzo here in this room. An important part of his job will be to train Lorenzo to the point where he can operate the system on his own after you leave.«*

*»Building such a complex system must take an eternity!« Gianna replies.*

*»Do you have something better to do? Then get lost! I'd like to hear your friend David's opinion now though!«*

Gianna translates Alessandro's proposal word for word. David listens attentively and makes a longer face with each sentence. Finally, he turns to Lorenzo in English, hoping to avoid this back-and-forth translation.

*»So have you guys started implementing this portal yet or are you still in the planning stages?«*

*»We are still at the very beginning! There is a basic consensus on the part of the bosses as to what this system should be able to do one day. But no one has thought about implementation yet.«*

*»So have you documented this consensus anywhere in writing?«*

*»Yes, there is already some sort of requirements document that all parties have agreed on.«*

*»Can I take a look at this document?«*

*»Not until you commit to supporting us!«*

*»Well, we're not getting anywhere like this!« David grumbles and shakes his head. »You can't expect me to do a serious effort estimate when I have no idea of your requirements!«*

Lorenzo briefly consults with his father. Then he disappears briefly from the computer room and returns with a thin loose-leaf binder.

*»Here. This is the printout of our MoU<sup>33</sup>. You can look at it here and now. But I warn you! If you don't keep this information to yourself, you're a dead man!«*

David flips through the five sheets of paper and can't help but grin.

*»That's all that's been made binding so far?«*

*»Yes, that's all. Do you have anything wrong with it?«*

*»Well, it doesn't say very much! But I see that in your particular case rather as an advantage!«*

*»What do you mean?«*

*»Quite simply, the fewer concrete requirements there are in such a document, the more design freedom you have in the implementation. Based on these rather general requirements, you could build on existing open source software and adapt its code to your specific requirements. If I understood your plans correctly, this should be doable within a month. Assuming I have a good internet connection and a properly equipped workstation!«*

*»That's not where it will fail. Be prepared, however, that I will spend the entire time next to you and watch everything you do closely! First, I want to understand exactly how this program will*

*work in the end, and second, my father has already impressed upon me that under no circumstances will you have unsupervised Internet access.«*

Gianna has been following the dispute between David and Lorenzo closely. But now she also has a question and turns to Alessandro again in Italian:

*»You said you had a job for both of us! These two computer freaks already seem to get along very well. I'm still not clear on my role in this, though!«*

*»It's very simple,« Alessandro grins. »You told me you ran a video blog in Rome. Right?«*

*»Yes, I do,« Gianna replies, not really knowing what Alessandro is getting at.*

*»For our new portal we need some nice promotional videos. We already have the necessary camera and computer equipment, but unfortunately we don't have anyone who is able to create some professional looking videos with it. Besides, you do have a nice voice and a pretty face.«*

*»You want me to sit in front of the camera and promote your illegal activities? So that God and the world can then see me on the Internet? Never! Over my dead body!«*

*»Now don't be like that! Other girls do completely different things on camera. You're not going to get your knickers in a twist over a few nice commercials! Besides, we can't put you in front of a camera with your current stubble hairdo anyway. You'll get a nice wig with long blond hair. I can promise you: With the wig and some makeup on your face, even your parents won't recognize you!«*

*»If I understood David correctly, it will take him at least a month to implement this portal thing! Does that mean we'll be stuck in Livorno for that long?«*

*»That depends entirely on you! As soon as you have done the job, I will organize the transport to the Danube domain for you. However, if you accept my offer, I expect you to complete it! You can continue to live with Signora Malerba. Since you have already been robbed, not much can happen to you there. You can have free lunch here in our office. Apart from that you will get some pocket money every day. We don't want you to starve!«*

*»By when do we have to decide whether to accept your offer?«*

*»See you tomorrow! Sleep a night over it and come back here tomorrow morning. I would be happy if we could come to an agreement! But I warn you herewith urgently - and tell this also to your friend: No word to any human soul about what we have discussed here today and will discuss in the future. Otherwise, things will go badly for you!«*

## **Establishment**

*»Have you thought this through?« asks Kevin as he sits with Jan over a good bottle of red wine. »You don't give up a well-paying job like that lightly!«*

In the meantime, a few years have passed again. Jan has long since completed his doctoral studies and works in a renowned Cologne management consultancy. The large apartment on Barbarossaplatz now belongs to Kevin and him. The handsome salaries they bring home each month allow them to live carefree lives. Not much is left of the spartan shared apartment furnishings of years past. The two have thoroughly renovated the bathroom, the kitchen and all five rooms and equipped them with new, modern furniture.

*»Yes, I have thought it over very carefully. When I started at the consulting firm, it was clear to me from the very beginning that I wouldn't do this job for the rest of my life. I don't regret my decision at the time. Those were really instructive and interesting years, but at some point I've had enough. I would also like to have something like a private life again!«*

*»Why don't you just take it down a notch and reduce your hours a little?« Kevin suggests.*

*»I've already tried that, but it doesn't work. We are constantly being sent to new companies and new projects, and each time the game starts all over again. The employees in the companies regard us as ignorant smart alecks who only talk smart and have no idea about the processes in the company. And our clients keep a close eye on whether we deliver the expected results for the money they pay. We are constantly under pressure from all sides and try to live up to all expectations.«*

*»Do your colleagues see it that way too?«*

*»The peer pressure is the worst thing of all! You never work alone, but are always part of a team in which the members spur each other on and expect full commitment. If you ever slow down, you're immediately accused by your colleagues of letting the team down.«*

*»Don't you have any older colleagues to bring a little calm to the team?«*

*»At least not in my projects so far. Like me, my colleagues all come directly from university and are motivated to the point of no return. Private life, free time, relationships - everything is sacrificed for the job, and anyone who doesn't go along with it jeopardizes the success of the entire team and is bullied accordingly. I've been in this game long enough. But now I've finally had enough. Besides, it's not as if I want to twiddle my thumbs in the future! I got an interesting offer from the foreign ministry of the domain. If I accept within the next two weeks, I'll have the job!«*

*»At the State Department? You'll be on the road a lot there too!«*

*»Not nearly as often as I do now! The last few years I've only been on the road and lived out of a suitcase. That's over now! At the ministry, I'm supposed to deal with the risk analysis of foreign guarantees. I'm sure I won't be able to avoid one or two business*



*trips. But I can do the main work during regular working hours here in Cologne.«*

*»Are you going to become a civil servant then?« Kevin asks with a laugh.*

*»That can happen!« Jan grins. »Would that be so bad?«*

*»At least it's a great difference compared to your current job at the consulting firm. I still can't quite believe that it's supposed to be so unbearable there. My father used to bitch about the consulting guys, too. But those were different times. He used to say that every time the Meckis<sup>34</sup> showed up at the company, the next wave of layoffs came shortly after. The real dirty work was then done by specially hired specialists. Do you know the old movie 'Up in the Air', with the then still young George Clooney?«*

*»Yes, I know that one! But it's set in the USA and doesn't have much to do with the German corporate culture of the time!«*

*»I only want to say that these management consultants were often unscrupulous pigs who made their money by destroying the livelihoods of countless employees.«*

*»Do you think jobs will be preserved if ailing companies are just allowed to muddle along? Where are the salaries supposed to come from if the profits disappear? A company is like a plant: First it is tiny. If it is lucky and in a favorable location, it will grow, flourish and blossom. But eventually its time will come and it will die and new plants will take its place. Is that such a tragedy?«*

*»Not for the company,« Kevin says, »but for the employees it is a tragedy. These external restructuriers are like the gravediggers, moving from one corpse to the next.«*

*»There must be gravediggers, too!« Jan replies coolly. »Besides, I don't know what you're getting at! In my projects of the last few years, it was not at all a matter of flattening companies and laying people off. On the contrary, we are currently in such an*

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34 Meckis: nickname for the employees of the management consultancy McKinsey

*upswing that our biggest problem is finding good employees! The job market is empty! Companies have more vacancies than they can fill. The current situation is not at all comparable to the past. Times have changed!«*

*»I don't know!« Kevin answers with a doubtful look and sips his red wine. »The same people are sitting in the control centers of industry and politics today as before the collapse of the global economy. They're following their trained behavior patterns. If we don't pay attention and learn from the mistakes of the past, history will repeat itself and we'll be left with nothing again!«*

Jan shakes his head uncomprehendingly and fills the red wine glasses.

*»Now, do you want to toast with me to my new job at the State Department, or do you want to keep telling old stories?«*

Kevin looks at him for a moment, lost in thought, but then shakes his head and raises his glass:

*»To the future foreign minister of the Rhine domain!«*

## **Livorno**

Gianna and David hadn't thought long about whether to accept Alessandro Bocelli's offer. They had no other choice. Now they have been working for his smuggling company from Monday to Saturday for two weeks. They have an almost family-like relationship with their landlady, the old Signora Malerba. In the mornings, before they go to work, they have breakfast with her, and in the evenings, when they leave the agency around seven o'clock and return to the hostel, the signora has usually already cooked and is happy when the young people keep her company while they eat.

Work at the agency is progressing well. David presented Lorenzo with various content management systems that could be considered for the given task. After Lorenzo decided on an open source software, David implemented a first prototype. Alessandro Bocelli was so taken with it that he spontaneously called a video conference with the bosses of the other smuggling organizations. After a few initial discussions, David was able to

convince all the decision-makers of the advantages of his solution and has since been working single-mindedly to complete the computer program.

In the meantime, Gianna has set up a studio in one of the offices, where she is working on a series of promotional videos. The studio's technical equipment far exceeds the possibilities she had in Rome for her video blog. However, there were initial problems editing the raw material she recorded. Until David downloaded professional video editing software from an illegal file-sharing site on the darknet, which solved that problem as well.

As far as the darknet is concerned, David has found his master in Lorenzo. Until now, he had mostly stayed in the visible part of the Internet. Only rarely had he dived into the depths of the Deep Web, where the Darknet embodies the ugliest and most dangerous part. For Lorenzo, it's the other way around. The Darknet is his second home. With somnambulistic certainty, he surfs through the illegal, hidden websites and virtual marketplaces that offer all the things that make a criminal's heart beat faster.

The working atmosphere in the agency is more relaxed and familiar than David knows from most of his project assignments. In addition to Alessandro Bocelli and his youngest son Lorenzo, the secretary and two of Alessandro's other sons also work in the office. Gianna and David do not know what Lorenzo's brothers do exactly. Like Alessandro, they are involved in operations. At lunchtime, the office staff often goes out to eat in town. In the side streets branching off from Via Grande, there are a few small bistros that offer delicious and varied dishes on their lunch menus. Many of them also deliver their food to the agency if required, what Alessandro's secretary always arranges when her boss's schedule does not allow for an out-of-town lunch break.

Sundays are free for Gianna and David. Today they hike to Montenero. The arduous climb, to the Benedictine monastery perched on a hill, is rewarded by a wonderful view of the town and the sea. David would also

like to visit the inside of the monastery, but Gianna has had enough of monastic life since her stay in Sutri and successfully vetoes it. Probably this saves the two from worse, because in the meantime their wanted posters hang in every monastery south of the Po domain.

In the evening, the signora cooks a huge portion of spaghetti with minced meat sauce for the two hikers. And because it's Sunday, she fetches two bulbous bottles of country wine from her cellar. It is a long evening, during which Gianna and the Signora together try to teach David a little Italian. Unfortunately without much success. His talents are definitely more technical than linguistic.

It's almost midnight when David and Gianna, tipsy as can be, visit their dorm room and discover that for once they'll have it all to themselves. Two men are sawing trunks in the neighboring snoring room. The other bedroom is occupied by a group of six women, who are also already fast asleep. When Gianna returns from brushing her teeth and turns out the light, she lies down next to David in the lower bed.

*»Do you mind if I keep you company down here?« she asks him in a soft voice.*

*»No,« he replies in surprise, moving to the outer edge of the narrow mattress.*

*»Shall I tell you something? Today was the best day since we met!« she whispers and gives him a kiss on the cheek.*

The bright full moon shines through the window and gives the otherwise rather dreary room an almost homey atmosphere. David runs his fingers over Gianna's face. She smiles like a Cheshire cat and moves very close to him. Tenderly, she puts her arm on his shoulder. David slides his right arm under Gianna's back and pulls her tightly against him. Meanwhile, his left hand begins to slowly move down her body. When he reaches her belly button, he slides his hand under her T-shirt and gently runs his fingers along her abdominal wall. Gianna closes her eyes and lets him. His palm reaches the curves of her firm breasts. Slowly, his fingers circle the hard

nipples before resuming their exploratory journey south. Breathing heavily, he begins to caress her inner thighs and only when his hand finds its way into her panties and between her legs does Gianna flinch slightly and whisper:

*»Please give me some more time. I am not ready yet. Please don't be angry with me!«*

*»It's okay!« he stammers a little embarrassed.*

*»If you want, I can still do something good for you!«*

David is no longer capable of any reasonable response. His organism has already reduced the blood flow to the brain to a minimum, and redirected it to the erectile tissue of his sexual organ. Breathing heavily, he felt Gianna's hand carefully embrace his hard member. His arousal has already reached the point of no return for him. He feels her hand slowly begin to massage his penis. The rhythmic up and down movements become faster and faster. His body tenses more and more to the breaking point. Until his excitement finally reaches its peak and his manhood, like an Icelandic geyser, erupts with a violent explosion.

*»You're a little piglet,« Gianna whispers mischievously as she sees his ejaculate stuck above her, on the underside of the top bunk.*

She gives him another kiss and cuddles up to him before she disappears into the realm of dreams. And David also falls asleep, tired. While from above the lubricating oil of his loins slowly begins to rain down on her face. And in the glow of the moonlight, the spectacle on the spiral springs of the bunk bed is reminiscent of fresh dew that beads from the leaves of a palm tree after a cold desert night and awakens the parched earth to new life.

## **Baptism**

*»Uncle Jan - how stupid does that sound?«*

Jan and his partner Kevin are in high spirits. It's a beautiful summer's day and this afternoon in Jan's hometown his little niece Lena will be baptized. Six months ago, his sister Anna gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Nothing else is known in the family about the paternal father, but this in no way diminishes the joy about the new addition to the Eckert family.

In Jan's brand-new sports car, the two reach the small town west of Cologne in less than half an hour. The church is already well attended when Jan and Kevin arrive and take their seats in the first pew next to Jan's mother, Anna and baby Lena. It looks like the whole family has come. Even Aunt Martha, Jan's father's sister, has arrived, together with her husband Ole, from the Swedish domain association.

Jan thinks about how long it has been since he last attended a christening. It must have been little Isabella, the daughter of his former flatmates Elena and Patrick. How time flies! In the meantime, the little whirlwind has long since started school and keeps her parents on their toes. Apparently she has inherited the southern temperament of her Spanish mother. Isabella was baptized Catholic at that time. Nevertheless, Jan was allowed to do the second godfather. But only because Patrick's brother, as a baptized and confirmed Catholic and thus the main godfather, met the strict formal requirements of the Catholic Church. Today the Protestants are among themselves and everything is a bit more relaxed. Jan was the first to be asked by Anna if he would be willing to take over the godparenthood. He did not hesitate for a second and immediately said »yes«. As a reward, he is allowed to carry and hold little Lena to the baptismal font at the beginning of the ceremony. He was assisted by two other godmothers: Julia, a longtime friend and work colleague of Anna - and Patrizia, a distant cousin of theirs.

Little Lena is not very interested in the whole process. She sleeps like a log the whole time and only blinks her eyes briefly in irritation when the warm baptismal water runs over the few hairs on her little head. At this point, at the latest, the invited guests had expected at least a few cries - but

nothing. Shortly after the pastor has patted her bald head dry, she falls fast asleep again.

After church, the whole company meets in the garden of Jan's parents' house for coffee and cake. Anna and Elvira Eckert were very busy yesterday and baked several cakes. In the evening, a catering service delivers an extensive buffet. Jan can't remember ever having seen the relatives so fully assembled. The last time he saw some of his uncles and aunts was during his school days. And he doesn't even know some of the cousins who are present. Not to mention their children, who are now all together, shouting loudly as they romp around the Eckert family estate.

*»Aunt Martha, did you just say you live in Lummerland now?«*

*»No, not quite,« she laughs at her nephew Jan. »Ole and I live in Lumparland. It's on Åland, a Swedish archipelago not far from Stockholm.«*

*»Åland - something tells me that. But I can't think of it right now! Give me a hint!«*

Immediately, Jan's mother Elvira speaks up and proudly announces:

*»You know, Martha, our Jan has been working in the foreign ministry of the Rhine domain for a few years now. That's where he knows a lot about all the new countries!«*

*»Really? By golly Elvira, you can really be proud of your two children! Your Anna is a department head in the public order office and your Jan is a bigwig in the ministry! All respect!«*

*»Mom, now please stop showing off! You know I'm just a lowly clerk at the State Department. But Aunt Martha, what's all this about Lummerland? I know I've heard of it before, but I can't remember in what context.«*

*»Lumparland, boy, not Lummerland! But if you're interested: Åland used to belong to Finland, although the inhabitants have spoken Swedish for ages. After the great collapse, however, Sweden and Finland ceased to exist as separate states. Unlike the*

*Finns, who are still suffering from the consequences of the crisis, the Swedes got off lightly. In our country, as in yours, the domain system was introduced, which, however, first led to indescribable chaos and petty statehood. If you look at the topology of the former Swedish territory, you will see that the country is crossed by many watersheds. The result is a multitude of insignificant dwarf domains. Fortunately, it did not take long for the Swedes to remember their national identity and form a confederation of small domains. Today, all domains where Swedish is spoken belong to this confederation, and to the outside world, as in earlier times, the whole is represented by the Swedish Royal House. The domains correspond more or less to the former provinces and the border to Norway has remained pretty much the same. That ran namely also before already along the watershed.«*

*»Now I remember again!« says Jan. »Åland used to be an autonomous territory under Finnish sovereignty, but has always felt very connected to Sweden because of the language. So it's a prime example of the domain system putting back together what belonged together.«*

*»Well, the Finnish-speaking minority on our island may see it differently, but economically, the switch to Sweden has definitely been worth it for the population.«*

*»And how long have you been living in Åland? I always thought you lived in Stockholm?«*

*»Only a few years ago. We chose Lumparland as our retirement home and bought a small, tranquil cottage by the sea there. But Ole still drives over to Stockholm to his old company from time to time. They don't seem to get along so easily without him, and besides, we can make good use of the money he earns there. The pension coffers are known to be sparsely filled even in our country!«*

The topic of pensions immediately brings Jan's mother back into the picture.



*»Just like us! I would so love to retire now and take care of little Lena. But this stupid domain government always claims that the pension funds are empty and we old people have to make our contribution to the reconstruction. I think that is so unfair! After all, we have been paying into the pension scheme for years ...«*

*»Gee, Mom!« she is abruptly interrupted by her daughter. »Don't start with the same old story again! Little Lena goes to the daycare center during the day and is well taken care of there. I think it's better anyway if she's among other children right from the start and isn't pampered by you at home all day!«*

*»I think so, too!« Aunt Martha agrees. »Here in Sweden, daycare places have also been massively expanded in recent years. But tell me Jan, when can we expect to have a baby from you?«*

Elvira Eckert looks down in embarrassment, while Jan and Kevin grin at each other. But before they come out as life partners, Anna defuses the situation:

*»Jan is much too busy with his work! Say, don't you have to go abroad again soon?«*

*»Yeeees,« he answers, still thinking about whether this wouldn't be the right opportunity to introduce his friend Kevin to the whole family. Finally, however, out of consideration for his mother, he refrains from doing so and says: »Next week I'm flying to Rome for a few days.«*

*»Rome?« his mother repeats in horror, slapping her hands over her mouth. »Isn't that terribly dangerous? I hear it's still total chaos down there! How can they send you there?«*

*»Calm down mom! I have business at the Vatican and it is perfectly safe there. I promise you that I will stay away from the rest of the city. So you can have complete peace of mind!«*

*»What does our domain have to do with the Vatican?« asks Anna curiously.*

*»The Vatican City State is one of the many states and domains with which we maintain trade relations. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to tell you exactly what the trip is about. That falls under my duty of confidentiality.«*

Jan's mother, however, is still beside herself:

*»Promise me that you will get in touch immediately when you have arrived well in the Vatican! And also when you are back in Cologne. And remember: Italians are cunning and steal like ravens. Watch your wallet if you get into a crowd and never carry your handbag ...«*

*»Mom! I'm not carrying a handbag! And there are no Italians there anymore either. Romans and Tiberians live where I go. Italy is history. You should know that by now! And besides, I'm old enough to take care of myself. But if it makes you feel better, I'll get in touch with you. After all, the Vatican actually already has Internet and telephones!«*

Everyone at the table laughs out loud at Jan and his worried mother. And there is still a lot of laughter that evening. The beer and wine flow in streams and Jan also drinks one glass after the other to the well-being of little Lena. Kevin has thankfully agreed to be the driver for the return trip. As midnight slowly approaches, a police car stops at the garden fence. The policemen explain in a friendly tone that a neighbor has complained about the noise and that perhaps it would be better to move the party indoors now. For most of the guests, however, this is the signal to leave. Jan and Kevin also say goodbye and make their way home. When they enter the apartment, Jan notices that someone has left a message on the telephone answering machine while they were away. »Probably another commercial call,« he thinks to himself as he presses the play button. However, the voice from the loudspeaker is instantly familiar to him:

*»Hello Jan! This is Domenico! I hope you remember me! We were once together years ago on a study trip in the Orient. Baghdad - Mesopotamia - you know! You may wonder why I am calling! Well - I heard that you are coming to Rome to the Vatican next*

*week! How do I know that? You won't believe it, but in the meantime I've been there too. I am now an assistant in the Economic Secretariat of the Holy See! Yesterday, unsuspectingly, I was preparing a planned work meeting with some visitors from the Rhine domain - and what do I see: Jan Eckert from Cologne is coming to visit us! Well, if that is not a surprise! We will definitely see each other at the meeting! I just wanted to give you a heads up. It's a pity that I didn't reach you personally, but for such cases God gave us the technology! You probably have a lot on your plate and are always away on business. I feel the same way! Ora et labora! That is my motto. Pray and work! You can get in touch with me beforehand! You can find my contact details on the homepage of the Economic Secretariat. So - that's all I have to say at the moment. In any case, I am already looking forward to our reunion next week! God's greetings and have a nice evening!«*

Jan stands next to the answering machine as if thunderstruck. As if a ghost from another world had just spoken to him. Slowly, he sorts through his memories and thoughts:

*»Domenico - Domenico Scarelli. The priest from Milan. Well, well, well. He seems to have quite a career, too. Domenico Scarelli works as an assistant at the Vatican. Well, he always believed that he was called to higher things. In any case, he still has his Bible verses down pat. Who knows what position he will reach in the Vatican. Maybe he will even become pope one day! Then I could say I would have - it doesn't matter. His voice has changed somehow. It sounds somehow - cooler. But maybe that's because of the distance between Rome and Cologne. Let's see how else he has changed. Domenico Scarelli!«*

Jan shakes his head in disbelief and goes to bed.

## **Genoa**

Four long weeks have passed since Gianna and David started their work at the FXC tourist agency. The promotional videos produced by Gianna have been ready for a week and are just waiting to be published on the Darknet

by Lorenzo Bocelli. Gianna therefore had time last week to assist David in writing the user manual for his computer program. Alessandro Bocelli and his three sons carried out the functional test of the finished software. In the end, everything depended only on Lorenzo's final verdict, and when he nodded and confirmed to his father that he could handle the system on his own in the future, Alessandro Bocelli declared the project successfully completed. The boss didn't miss a beat and even bought a dinner in a good restaurant to celebrate the day. After dessert, he officially announced the good news Gianna and David had been waiting for so long: In two days their ship will leave for Genoa and all preparations for their safe onward transport to the Danube domain have already been made.

In the meantime, the two days are over. Gianna and David stand with their backpacks at the agreed meeting point at the Four Moors Monument and wait for Alessandro, who wants to take them from there to their ship.

*»I think here he comes!« David shouts as he sees a motorized tricycle rattling along.*

Alessandro Bocelli is actually sitting in the driver's cab of the Ape<sup>35</sup>, grinning from ear to ear. He brings his old vehicle to a halt next to the monument. As the fetid blue smoke from the two-stroke engine spreads across the harbor promenade, he climbs out of his moving sardine can and greets his former employees:

*»A very good morning to you! I hope you were able to sleep with excitement. If you're ready, we're ready to go!«*

*»Buongiorno, Signore Bocelli« Gianna replies, thinking she has misheard. »Why don't we walk? The port is just up ahead!«*

*»Mistake dear ones! You have not booked a cruise, but a simple transfer in the wooden class. You are traveling with a tanker and not with a luxury liner! The oil port of Livorno is located in the north of the city. Be glad that you don't have to walk there! But if you really want to, we can meet there in two hours. With any luck, your ship won't have left yet!«*

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35 Ape: Piaggio three-wheeled van

Bocelli throws the two backpacks onto the cargo bed of the tricycle and asks David to make himself comfortable there. Gianna joins him in the driver's cab. The space in the narrow tin cell is just enough to close the doors of the Ape. Unlike Gianna, Alessandro doesn't mind a little physical contact and happily rattles off with his vehicle.

The Ape has to struggle quite a bit as it climbs the canal bridge at Fortezza Vecchia so fully loaded. After they have successfully passed the crest, however, it goes down all the faster and when Bocelli drives through the right-hand bend at the end of the ramp with full momentum, Gianna thinks that now their last hour has struck, because they will certainly fall over in a moment. But nothing of the sort happens. With a loud roar, they move away from the busy part of the port area and jet through the deserted area of the old industrial port. Before the economic crash, the heart of the city must once have beaten here. Now the warehouses are dilapidated and overgrown with weeds. The remains of torn power lines hang from rusted metal poles. The road surface is in a pitiful state and garbage is lying around everywhere. David, who was not exactly thrilled at first to be riding in the hard back of this pizza bomber, is now glad not to have to walk through this godforsaken area. The last time he saw such a dreary environment was in Rome - at the Stazione Termini. Just the memory of this resounding experience triggers a stabbing pain under his skull, which has healed well in the meantime.

After a few kilometers of driving through this seemingly never-ending industrial wasteland, they approach the oil port. Even from a distance, they can see the old diesel power plant that supplies the city and its surrounding area with makeshift electricity. A thick black plume of soot escapes from the old, tall smokestacks and is carried far inland by the onshore sea breeze. The filter systems have not been working for a long time. David realizes in one fell swoop where the terrible stench of exhaust gas came from, which had filled the old town on many a day during their stay.

Behind the power plant, Alessandro Bocelli leaves the main road and steers the tricycle through the confusing maze of the old oil harbor. The

ride finally ends on a harbor pier. At the thick bollards at the edge of the stinking harbor basin lies a completely rusted ship, lashed with thick ropes.

*»This is your dream ship!« Bocelli shouts as he hurries up the gangway and disappears inside this soul seller.*

*»We're supposed to sail across the sea in this piece of junk?« Gianna asks skeptically.*

*»Maybe we'll sail close enough to shore that we can swim ashore in an emergency,« David tries to encourage himself.*

For the next few minutes, nothing happens at all. Gianna and David wait for their escape agent to return, while a few passing dockworkers stare at them grimly. Slowly they become uncomfortable and are relieved when finally Bocelli returns to the pier accompanied by a man in a captain's uniform.

*»Gianna, David, this is the comandante of this magnificent ship that will carry you to Genoa.«*

The two politely shake hands with the captain.

*»The tanker will leave in about two hours and you can stretch your legs on the deck until then. Besides the captain and you, there are four crew members on board. Please don't talk to them! The men know that you are coming. But the comandante doesn't want you to keep them from their work or tell them things that are none of their business!«*

*»Does the Comandante have a name, too?« Gianna asks cautiously.*

*»Yes, I have a name,« he replies with a strange expression on his face, from which Gianna can't make out much. »But it doesn't matter, and in the few hours we'll spend together, you'll just call me Comandante or Capitano. Just as you please.«*

*»When do you expect to arrive in Genoa?« Gianna asks the captain curiously.*

*»Around evening. As soon as we approach the port of Genoa, you must disappear inside the ship. The controls on entering the port area are very strict! We have a place in the engine room where you can hide until the coast is clear. Has Alessandro already explained to you how to proceed from the port?«*

*»Nothing specific. Just that we're going on the railroad!«*

*»Yes, that's right!« the captain replies, grinning all over his face.  
»I hope you don't have too many expectations in terms of comfort on this train ride. You should know that this won't be a trip on the Orient Express!«*

*»How are we going to get to the train?«*

*»When it is night, you will be picked up by our contacts directly at the ship and brought to your train. You will know everything else when the time comes!«*

*»Do you have any other questions?« Alessandro Bocelli wants to know and is already looking impatiently at his watch.*

*»No, not at the moment.«*

*»Then I will say goodbye to you now and wish you all the best! Get in touch when you have arrived safely in Vienna! David knows by now how to find our company in the darknet. Thanks again for the great work you have done for us in the last weeks. I really wouldn't have believed you could do it so quickly!«*

*»That's all right! After all, without your help, we both would have been pretty much screwed! Thanks for that!«*

After a moment's hesitation, Gianna gives up her stiff formality. She hugs Alessandro and squeezes him goodbye. He gladly lets it happen and then says goodbye to David and the captain. Then he enters his three-wheeled van and rattles away.

Two hours later, the tanker leaves the pier and bobs slowly toward the harbor exit. Gianna and David have made themselves comfortable on a bench at the stern of the ship. A dilapidated lifeboat hangs above them,

providing shade in the already oppressive midday heat. At least it serves this purpose perfectly. The two look wistfully at the houses passing them by. The four weeks in Livorno have changed them. They arrived here as two individuals and are now leaving this city again as a couple.

*»Do you love me?« Gianna wants to know when the ship leaves the harbor and sets course for the open sea.*

*»You know that!« David replies and gives her a kiss.*

Their romantic tryst in the dormitory, however, had remained a one-time affair. If only for lack of opportunity. Signora Malerba's guesthouse was always well frequented and the two would have liked a little more privacy. But they were also obviously uncomfortable talking about this incident, which would certainly not have happened this way without the preceding alcohol consumption. At least that's what they both tell themselves and leave it at that.

The ship moves inexorably away from the Etruscan Riviera. For a while, the monastery of Montenero on the mountain can still be seen in the bright light of the high sun. Then it too disappears in a veil of haze and soon the Tuscan mainland can only be glimpsed on the horizon of the turquoise sea.

Gianna is on such a large ship for the first time in her life. As a child, she had once sailed with her school class on an excursion steamer from Rome to Ostia. There they had visited the ancient excavation sites and returned to Rome in the afternoon. This day had remained vivid in her memory.

During the trip, she had thrown up over the railing several times. It was not because she had become seasick - God forbid - the Tiber flows so lazily and tranquilly that one does not even notice that one is on the water. It was the unbearable stench that made half of the school class hang over the railing as white as chalk and feed the fish, if there had been any in this cesspool. The operator of the shipping line went bankrupt after only one season and no excursion ship has been seen on the Tiber since.

David, on the other hand, had been on much larger ships. When he was still with Alexandra, they had once taken part in a cruise through the island



world of the Aegean. For two weeks, they had called at island after island, rushing from one shore leave to the next. On the islands themselves, however, only the small part with the tourist attractions was accessible. The local population lived their poor lives behind high fences and only came into contact with the world of tourists if they were lucky enough to get one of the much sought-after jobs, as a waitress in a restaurant or as a salesman in one of the countless souvenir stores. But the cruisers spent most of their time on their floating fortress anyway. David and Alexandra were bored to death by the second week. And when, on the penultimate day, the captain sailed past a capsized refugee boat and simply abandoned the help-seeking occupants to their fatal fate, David reached the point where he swore he would never set foot on a cruise ship again.

Hour after hour passes while Gianna and David, sitting in their wind-protected place in the stern, watch the eddies of the keel track being tirelessly milled into the smooth sea surface by the propulsion screw of the ponderous tanker. When the Ligurian coast appears on the horizon in the late afternoon, the red sun is already low in the west. Gianna and David excitedly run forward across the upper deck to catch a glimpse of the promised land ahead.

Genoa - La Superba - The proud one. Due to its favorable strategic position, the area around Genoa was settled by people many thousands of years ago. The Genoese have always been known as devious tacticians. Unlike other Ligurian ethnic groups, they willingly cooperated with the Roman Empire. Like a whore willingly spreading her legs for the well-to-do suitor, the proud city opened its unique natural harbor to the rising Roman Empire. In return, it benefited from profitable trade relations and was safe from pirate attacks thanks to the Roman protective power. After the discovery of America by Genoa's most famous son, Christopher Columbus, a golden age literally began for the city. The city's leaders used their banking houses to fill the coffers of Emperor Charles the Fifth in order to finance his voyages of exploration and conquest in the New World. Ships docked in Genoa incessantly and settled interest and

repayment of current loans with pure gold. Trade in gold and silver also proved very profitable, with the Genoese cleverly exploiting the high price differences between the New and Old Worlds to their advantage. And even centuries later, when the global economic collapse caused the city's power structure to collapse, the proud city rose like a phoenix from the ashes, securing in time the status of special economic zone of the resurgent Po domain.

Gianna and David stand fascinated at the bow railing and watch the city slowly approaching. Its foothills extend to the green slopes of the steeply sloping Apennine Mountains.

*»Tell me David, is there a fire up there on the mountains?« asks Gianna suddenly in amazement.*

*»Where?«*

*»Well there at the very top of the mountain range, where the dark green of the mountain forests merges into the blue of the sky!«*

The closer the ship gets to the coast, the more David recognizes this strange phenomenon.

*»Really strange. But it can't be a fire, or you'd see smoke rising!«*

From minute to minute, the glow on the hills becomes more and more intense. By now it looks as if a landscape painter had traced the contours of the transition between land and sky with a fluorescent highlighter. Suddenly, David cries out loudly:

*»Gianna, I know what that is! That's the metal border fence on the watershed to the Po domain, shining there in the light of the evening sun! The watershed runs right along the ridge. That's incredible!«*

The two devoutly observe the unique spectacle. As far as the eye can see, the reddish glowing demarcation line between the poor and the rich world is now clearly visible.

*»I wonder if you can see this glow from space?« Gianna asks.  
»They say you can see the Great Wall of China even from the moon!«*

*»That's a myth and doesn't correspond to the facts,« David instructs her. »However, the Great Wall of China doesn't shine like that in the sun, so this border should be easily visible, at least from a satellite close to Earth.«*

Gianna silently takes David's hand. By this time tomorrow, they will hopefully already have crossed this inhuman border created by human hands. What new experiences, surprises and disappointments might be waiting for them behind this metal fence? But she does not have much time for melancholy thoughts. She is startled when suddenly the captain stands behind them:

*»So my dears! The pleasant part of your passage is over! I'm going to take you to the hiding place in the engine room. Would you please follow me!«*

Gianna and David get their backpacks and descend deeper and deeper into the belly of the ship via several iron staircases. When they reach the engine room, they can almost no longer understand their own words. The air is hot and stuffy and it reeks of oil. As they pass the dull humming diesel generator, the radiated heat brings sweat to their foreheads. The captain leads them to the end of the engine room to a large, white metal locker, which at first glance is not at all recognizable as such and is more poorly camouflaged with a dirty curtain.

*»Here you have absorbent cotton!« the captain yells against the noise of the engines. »Stuff them in your ears! And take them with you when you disembark tonight! You'll need them even more during your rail trip than here! There's a toilet up ahead. I recommend you go there now! I'll come back in ten minutes and lock you in the cabinet. For the next four to five hours you'll be locked up like in prison! If an inspector comes on the ship and discovers this locker, I will pretend not to find the key. You must be quiet as mice in there at all costs! Do you understand me?«*

Gianna nods wordlessly. The thought of having to spend several hours in this tin coffin inevitably triggers a feeling of panic in her. At least David will be with her. Together with him, she will hopefully endure being locked up without going crazy with fear. The captain opens the locker and shows the two of them their Spartan abode for the coming hours.

*»It's best to sit on your backpacks facing each other. They then act like a seat cushion and dampen the vibrations of the machine. Unfortunately, you have to tighten your legs a bit so that you both fit in. And I have one more piece of advice for you: Don't drink anything from now on! Once you've left the ship, there won't be a toilet for quite a long time. If you have to go anyway, it will be unpleasant! I promise you that.«*

The captain disappears once again briefly to give his passengers a last pee break on the so-called toilet, which is filled with dirt. Then he locks them in and disappears back onto the bridge to prepare for the mooring maneuver.

When the key turns in the metal door, Gianna is overwhelmed by the shock of absolute darkness. Immediately she notices the signs of an incipient panic attack. Fortunately, however, she senses David's presence and grabs his hand in the dark. This slows her racing heartbeat and she gradually calms down. After a few minutes, her eyes have adjusted to the darkness. Thankfully, a little light does penetrate the interior of the locker through the ventilation slits at the top of the door. The two can now recognize each other, at least in outline. However, conversation is almost impossible due to the noise level and, in view of the captain's advice in case of an inspection by the port authorities, inadvisable anyway. Finally, Gianna and David stuff two thick cotton balls into their ears and patiently wait for things to come.

After an hour, the noise level suddenly decreases. The speed of the diesel engine slows down until it finally falls completely silent and only a soft hiss can be heard. Relieved, Gianna and David pull the absorbent cotton out of their ears.

*»We're docked in the harbor!« whispers Gianna.*

*»Yes. Let's see how long it takes them to let us out of here now!«  
David whispers back cautiously.*

The absolute silence that has now fallen has something threatening about it at first. But at least it allows them to talk quietly to each other again. Should a controller actually enter the engine room, they would certainly hear it soon enough and could prepare themselves in time. But not a soul comes. For endless hours they don't hear a sound. At some point, Gianna is overcome with fear that they might have been forgotten here in their hiding place. Finally, however, they hear the relieving squeak of a metal door, and a little later their locker opens and a grinning captain looks them in the face.

*»Welcome to Genoa! I hope you had a pleasant stay on board!«*

*»I have to go to the bathroom!« Gianna answers curtly and disappears as quickly as she can.*

*»Me too!« David says with a pained expression and waits patiently for his turn.*

Relieved in every way, they strap their backpacks onto their shoulders and follow the captain up through the maze of stairs.

*»You wait here!« he commands in a harsh tone as he exits the ship via the gangway and steps onto the dark harbor pier.*

In the meantime, midnight has passed. The waning moon bathes the ship and the long pier in a faint light. The captain looks around searchingly and then waves someone over. Almost silently, a transport vehicle from the port authority rolls up and stops right next to the gangway.

*»Come now!« he calls, beckoning Gianna and David to join him. As the two stand on the pier, he says, »I'll say goodbye to you now. The man at the wheel will take you to your train and explain everything else. Take care and good luck!«*

Before they know it, they are sitting in the back seat of the van and rolling away. Gianna feels as if she is in the spaceship of an alien. The flashing dashboard of this vehicle has nothing in common with the cars she has seen in her life so far.

*»Doesn't this thing have a motor?« she whispers to David. »I can't hear anything at all!«*

*»Haven't you ever ridden in an electric car?« he asks, surprised, and immediately regrets his ill-considered answer. »You'll be seeing a lot more of them in the future. If you think about it, this van here is already a real old-timer!«*

*»Did you have a good crossing?« asks the man at the wheel, glancing in David's direction in the rearview mirror.*

*»My friend doesn't speak Italian! You'll have to make do with me!« Gianna replies, somewhat annoyed by the macho behavior of the two men.*

*»That's fine with me! The main thing is that I have someone who understands me halfway. Yesterday ten Africans arrived here, not a single one of whom knew a word of Italian! That was quite a procedure until they were all stowed in the tank wagons!«*

*»Tank wagon? I thought we were going by rail!«*

*»That's true. The tank wagons are used to transport the crude oil to the refineries in Milan. Since the attack on the pipeline, all hell has broken loose here in the oil port of Genoa! All the crude oil that was previously delivered here by the big tank ships and pumped north through the pipeline now has to be laboriously transported there by rail. Didn't you guys hear about the bombing at all?«*

*»Not that I know of!« Gianna replies sheepishly.*

What did it care to her until recently if an oil pipeline blew up between Genoa and Milan? About as much as a sack of rice falling over in China.

*»For weeks, one tanker train after the other has been leaving the port here, heading north! The repair of the pipeline will still last a whole month! For the escapees, of course, this is a blessing! The border guards can't possibly check every tank wagon. And the new tank wagons are ideal for people smuggling due to their design. So far, no one has caught us out!«*

*»Are you saying we're traveling in one of those tank wagons?«*

*»Exactly! Didn't anyone tell you that? You are lucky anyway, because you have booked the luxury version! As far as I know, you want to go all the way to Trieste! Normally you would drive through there only to Milan. There you would be transferred with your wagon and with the next train it would go then further up to the oil port of Trieste. With a little luck you would arrive there after twenty-four hours. But we've also had customers who were on the road for four days!«*

*»Locked in a cauldron for four days?« Gianna asks incredulously.*

*»But not in the cauldron, girl! Or do you want to swim in the black crude oil sludge all the time? You travel in a small stowage compartment located below the tank between the wheel axle bogies.«*

The hairs on the back of Gianna's neck stand up. She has suffered from claustrophobia since childhood<sup>36</sup>. Just now she heroically spent several hours in this tin coffin on the ship and now she is supposed to continue the journey in the stowage space of a freight wagon!

*»But as I said before, your escape organization has reduced rail transport to the absolute minimum. From Genoa, you merely cross the mountains. That means a short climb, a short passage through the Giovi Tunnel, and then another short trip down to the Po Valley to Alessandria. There, after about two hours, the ordeal is already over and you will be taken over by a shuttle service that will bring you directly to Padua via the autostrada. It really couldn't be more comfortable! In Padua, you will again be loaded onto a tanker train and take it to the oil port of Trieste. Only your*

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36 Claustrophobia: Fear of confined spaces

*local contacts know what will happen there. So - here we are.  
Please take your backpacks and follow me.«*

The driver has parked the van next to a dark shack and helps Gianna and David get out. The road has come to an end. Only a small trail leads on from here. The three walk as quietly as possible along the inconspicuous path. The further they get, the more impenetrable the bushes surrounding them become.

*»Stay close to me!« whispers the guide. »Don't get lost!«*

After about a hundred meters, the lush vegetation ends and the three stand in front of a large rail area illuminated by floodlights. On at least ten parallel tracks, one tank wagon stands next to another - there must be hundreds! The escape agent takes a piece of paper and a flashlight out of his jacket. Then he walks along the front row of the train, wagon by wagon, and compares the numbers on the tank wagon with the numbers on his piece of paper by the light of the flashlight. After twenty unsuccessful attempts, he finally finds what he is looking for.

*»These here are your two wagons!« he announces. »The numbers are important so that we can find you again! Come over here. I'll show you the transport box now.«*

In the middle of the wagon, he crouches down. Under the black, penetratingly oil-smelling tank superstructure, he shines his light on a small square steel chamber measuring about sixty by sixty centimeters. After he pushes aside a latch, the chamber door swings aside to reveal the inside of the long cavity. Apparently, it is a storage space in which tools or other railroad utensils can be transported. In the light of the flashlight, it can be seen that the chamber extends about two meters through to the other side of the wagon.

*»Well, how do you like it?« he asks Gianna and David expectantly. »You guys should get some soft clothes out of your backpacks and lie on them. The floor vibrates quite a bit during the ride, and if you're lying directly on the bare steel, it's going to*



*be anything but comfortable. Push the backpack in and then climb into the crate feet first. Your head should be right up against the door. The stowage compartments are adequately ventilated by design, so you don't have to worry about suffocating in there. Once you are inside, I will padlock the door. After about two hours you will arrive in Alessandria and my colleague will get you out of the wagon using the wagon numbers. During the ride, you have to put absorbent cotton in your ears against the noise. I assume you have already received some on the ship. If not, I can give you some. If you don't protect your ears, you will suffer permanent hearing damage! So I warned you! So - the tank wagons are already filled with oil and you still have half an hour until we start. So you can still stretch your feet a little bit."*

David didn't understand much of all the explanations, but he can guess what's in store for him. Surely, he thinks, Gianna will translate the essentials for him before the trip starts.

But Gianna just stares wordlessly at the wagon and the empty steel chamber. Finally, she announces in a brittle voice:

*»I'm sorry! I'm not going! This is the end of the line for me!«*

## **Informal employees**

A few days after Lena's baptism, Jan accompanies his superior in the Foreign Ministry, Ministerial Director Dr. Weber, on a business trip to Rome. A three-day working meeting is to take place in the Vatican. The Vatican State is apparently planning extensive construction measures within its territory and has put the entire project out to international tender. A construction company from Stuttgart has been awarded the contract and is to carry out the work as general contractor. The Rhine domain is to act as guarantor for the repayment of the necessary loans and to guarantee this. Jan's task, together with colleagues from the Ministry of Economics, will be to prepare a detailed risk analysis of the overall project.

The start of the business trip is unspectacular. Jan and his boss fly from Cologne Airport to Milan on a normal scheduled flight. At the arrival

terminal, they are already awaited by a colleague from the Rhineland Embassy. She takes the two men to the private terminal and hands them over to the pilot who will fly them on to Rome. With his sunglasses, unkempt stubble beard and scuffed leather jacket, the dashing-looking man looks more like an Australian bush pilot than a representative of civil aviation. With quick steps, he leads his two passengers to a small Cessna parked next to a few other single-engine planes in front of a large hangar. He stows his passengers' travel bags and asks them to board. Neither Jan nor his boss have ever flown in such a tiny plane. Uncertain, they put their headsets over their ears and wait for things to come. The pilot starts the engine, performs his safety checks and speaks a few words in English over the radio to the tower before taxiing the Cessna to the runway.

After a short run-up, the pilot pulls the control horn toward him and the machine takes off leisurely. Jan gets an uneasy feeling in the stomach area during the swaying, but thankfully this subsides after a few minutes. After a short climb, the Cessna tilts into a steep left turn and sets course for Rome. Half an hour later they are flying over the main ridge of the Apennines. The pilot explains that they have just reached the end of the Po domain and crosses himself three times, which does not exactly help to cheer up his two passengers.

*»Look down, Mr. Eckert!« says Mr. Weber. »Can you see anything there?«*

Jan feverishly searches the green hillsides, but finds nothing that his boss could have meant.

*»No, I only see forest as far as the eye can see,« he replies uncertainly.*

*»Me too, Mr. Eckert, me too. But that will soon change! Because the Po domain is planning to build a gigantic border installation along the entire length of the watershed. Something similar to what once existed on the inner-German border. I predict: In ten years at the latest, there will be a huge insurmountable fence down there! A few companies from our domain have applied for*

*the execution of the project. Unfortunately, however, the competition from the Elbe domain won the bid. They simply pulled the plans of the old GDR<sup>37</sup> border fence from the archives and had an unbeatable reference project.«*

*»What are they trying to protect themselves from? That's all Italy down there!«*

*»The domain government in Milan has an enormous migration problem. The entire south of the peninsula has still not recovered from the consequences of the crash. People are pushing en masse from the impoverished cities of southern and central Italy to the north. Added to this is the continuing flow of refugees from Africa. The population on the Po will go to the barricades if the government does not finally do something about it.«*

Jan shakes his head, uncomprehending. We used to say that we had to fight the causes of migration, but now we're just putting up walls and fences everywhere again.

Compared to normal commercial aircraft, the small Cessna doesn't fly very high, so Jan can see many details on the ground. After a while, the woods clear and the first flat plains of Tuscany can be seen. For a quarter of an hour, Jan watches fascinated as a small toy landscape passes by down there. Finally, his boss speaks up again:

*»I think up ahead you can already see the sea!«*

The pilot confirms to him that they are about to reach Livorno and will follow the coastline from here on.

*»God help us if we have to make an emergency landing here!«  
sighs Dr. Weber.*

*»Why is that?« asks Jan, visibly worried.*

*»It's crawling with armed gangs down there. The city of Livorno is now one of the worst pirate havens on the Mediterranean. If they got their hands on us down there, they would immediately*

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37 GDR: German Democratic Republic

*take us hostage. Last year we had to ransom three of our citizens. I'd rather spare you the report of what the poor people had to go through while they were being held hostage.«*

Jan's queasy feeling in the stomach area is suddenly back. With clammy hands and an elevated pulse, he eagerly awaits reaching his destination airport. To distract himself a little, he pulls the two flyers from the inside pocket of his jacket that the department secretary has given him. They are the State Department's travel advisories on the current situation in the Vatican and Rome. The colorful brochure on the Vatican City State reads more like a travel guide and includes notes on the unique buildings and art exhibits. The only warning is not to leave the Vatican territory under any circumstances. Jan had only briefly skimmed the other flyer about Rome so far. Now he has time to catch up:

*A professionally unavoidable stay in Rome should only take place in accordance with a carefully prepared security concept. Anyone staying in Rome must be aware of the risk of terrorist attacks, hostilities, piracy and criminally motivated acts of violence. In the event of an emergency, there is a widespread lack of functioning government agencies that could provide assistance. There is currently no Rhineland foreign mission in Rome. In an emergency, try to reach the secured territory of the Vatican City State. It is not possible to obtain consular protection outside the Vatican City State. According to indications, foreign professionals and travelers in particular are at risk of becoming victims of assassinations, robberies, kidnappings, and other terrorist-motivated violent crimes. Militias and security forces not under the control of the Roman municipality often follow unpredictable loyalties and generally cannot guarantee safety for foreign travelers. Travel to the waters of former southern Italy is cautioned against. There is a risk of pirate attacks and hijackings off the coasts. Skippers are advised to exercise the utmost caution and register with the Venetian Security Center reporting office.*

Jan has read enough. Before he finally feels sick, he puts the info flyers back in his jacket and looks out the window. »What was that strange engine noise just now? Does the plane have enough fuel in the tank?«

Fortunately, the pilot shows no alarming behavior. »I'm probably already seeing ghosts,« Jan thinks to himself.

After an hour, the Cessna finally sets down for landing at the small Rome-Urbe airfield. The pilot contacts the tower. This time the conversation is not in English but in Italian. Jan doesn't understand a word, but the tone of the radio traffic makes it clear that the pilot and his counterpart are talking quite aggressively to each other. Finally, the Cessna rapidly loses altitude and approaches the runway. Jan can already make out the Tiber and, behind it, the grounds of the small city airport. What he sees there, however, does not exactly help to reassure him. The scenery reminds him of many a movie about the Second World War. The runway is shielded by several barbed wire barriers. Soldiers patrol the fence in military jeeps. Even a few armored personnel carriers can be seen next to the asphalt runway. The Cessna touches down, rolls out and turns toward the airport buildings. The pilot finally stops the plane right next to a helicopter on the apron.

*»Come on, come on!« he urges his passengers to hurry, while he himself jumps out of the cockpit.*

He briefly greets the pilot of the helicopter, who has apparently already been waiting for the Cessna to arrive, and then immediately retrieves his passengers' luggage from the aircraft. Jan and his boss realize that another change of aircraft is now probably in the offing. Without saying much, the new pilot directs them to his helicopter and asks them to board. The Cessna pilot just pats his passengers on the shoulder as a farewell and quickly hurries back to his machine. Jan and Dr. Weber have not even fastened their seat belts properly in the helicopter when the small Cessna takes off from the runway again.

The flight to the heliport of the Vatican leads over a dense urban area. The gigantic dome of St. Peter's Basilica can already be seen in the distance. But when Jan looks down, he is shocked by the sight he sees from up here. Entire streets lie in ruins. The charred ruins of once stately houses rise

from mountains of rubble. There are hardly any people on the streets. Except for a few military vehicles, there are no cars. Only now and then can a horse-drawn vehicle be seen slowly making its trail through the dusty, dilapidated streets. »What has become of this city,« Jan thinks to himself. The desolate atmosphere reminds him a little of the hard times in Cologne, when the big crash brought all public life to a temporary standstill. The only difference is that the people down here are still hoping in vain for recovery. The apocalyptic scene ends abruptly as the helicopter reaches the Vatican wall and slowly hovers over the sprawling area of the Vatican Gardens. The Vatican State heliport is located in the farthest corner of the garden grounds, just behind the high, barbed-wire entangled wall. This wall separates two worlds: On the Vatican side is a green oasis whose creation must have been modeled on the biblical paradise. On the other side of the wall, violence, destruction and abject poverty reign. The contrast between the two sides could hardly be greater.

When the helicopter touches down on the landing pad and the passengers get out, breathing a sigh of relief, there is no longer any sign of the inhospitable world behind the high wall. A young priest in a black gown comes hurrying up and asks:

*»Are you Drs. Weber and Eckert from Cologne? Reverend Scarelli has sent me to pick you up. Unfortunately, important official business prevents him from appearing here himself. He has asked me to take you to the Santa Martha Guest House, where you can recover a bit from the exhausting journey.«*

The priest leads the guests to his car, which he has parked right next to the heliport. Courteous and officious like a bellboy, he holds open the car doors and stows the luggage. Finally, he takes a seat behind the wheel and drives off. Slowly and deliberately, he steers through the maze of paths in the Vatican Gardens until he reaches a courtyard directly behind St. Peter's Basilica and announces:

*»So gentlemen, we are already there. The large building there in front is the guest house. The porter at the reception desk is*

*already waiting for you. It is now shortly before two o'clock. So you still have plenty of time until your first meeting at five o'clock. Doctor Eckert - I have been instructed by Reverend Scarelli to take you to him in the Apostolic Palace. Only if you want to, of course! He would like to show you his workplace and afterwards give you a little guided tour of the Vatican.«*

*»By golly, Mr. Eckert!« counters Ministerial Director Weber, »you seem to be very well connected here!«*

*»You could say that,« Jan laughs, »I know the reverend from my student days. We're old acquaintances, so to speak. Do you mind if I pay him a quick visit?«*

*»Go ahead! The main thing is that you're back here at the guesthouse on time at five!«*

The priest takes the travel bags out of the trunk and accompanies Dr. Weber to the reception.

*»I left your bag with the porter,« he says as he reboards the car.  
»I'm sure you don't want to drag it around the Vatican with you!«*

Some alarm bells start ringing in Jan's head. After joining the State Department, he had been extensively trained on proper conduct while traveling abroad. One of the most important rules was never to leave his luggage unattended. Was Domenico setting a clumsy trap for him here, trying to get his hands on secret documents with such a cheap trick? Jan can't imagine that with the best will in the world. Besides, he thinks to himself: *»In my travel bag there are only clothes and my encrypted notebook computer - and hacking that in the short time available is impossible!«*

Meanwhile, the priest drives to the other side of St. Peter's Basilica and parks the car in a courtyard.

*»If you would please follow me! I'm afraid we'll have to walk the last bit.«*

Through endless corridors and winding staircases, Jan follows the flowing gown of the man hurrying ahead of him. Finally, they reach a long hallway that inevitably reminds Jan of the rooms of a registration office. A few chairs and benches stand loosely on the window side. This is obviously the waiting area for the offices on the other side of the corridor. However, there is not much visitor traffic at the moment. In front of one of the many offices, the priest stops and asks Jan to enter with a sweeping gesture of his arms:

*»Here you go, Doctor Eckert - here we are!«*

Shortly before Jan enters the room, he notices a little girl in the hallway sitting on one of the waiting chairs and staring at him with wide eyes. Jan is briefly a little confused, because the little girl reminds him strongly of Isabella, the lively daughter of Patrick and Elena. But then he hears a familiar voice coming from the room:

*»Gosh Jan! I am glad to see you! I hope you had a pleasant journey. I'll have time for you in a few minutes. I just have to deal with some bagatelle. Do you mind grabbing a coffee in the cafeteria down the hall and waiting for me there for five minutes? I'll be there as soon as I can!«*

Domenico Scarelli has grown remarkably older. Jan probably wouldn't have recognized him on the street. Of his once full head of hair, only a few sparse remnants remain. Deep wrinkles have already formed around his eyes, and the dark circles underneath do not contribute to a very positive appearance. He resides on a heavy leather armchair behind a massive wooden desk. In front of the table sits a man on a simple chair. He is definitely not a clergyman. The suit he wears has seen better days. The briefcase he clutches on his lap is scuffed and obviously has many years under its belt. Jan guesses that he must be a civilian employee from Rome.

*»No problem, Domenico,« Jan replies, »we haven't seen each other for so many years that the five minutes won't matter anymore.«*



Jan leaves the office and steps out into the hallway again. The priest who brought him here is nowhere to be seen. Jan is about to head for the cafeteria when the little girl stands in his way and asks him in Italian:

*»Come ti chiami?«*

*»Uh, I nix italiano!« Jan replies, puzzled.*

*»I asked you what your name is!« the little girl replies in perfect German.*

*»My name is Jan,« he laughs in surprise. »And what's your name?«*

*»My name is Gianna,« the little curly-haired girl answers, beaming at Jan like a little angel. »That's a nice suit you're wearing! The men here at the Vatican usually all wear black robes - like ghosts! Are you afraid of ghosts?«*

*»No, but when I was your age, I used to be afraid of ghosts. But none ever came into my room, so at some point I wasn't afraid of them anymore.«*

The little girl slaps her hands in front of her mouth and snorts with pleasure. Jan thinks for a moment. As a child, he had actually been afraid of ghosts and aliens for a few years. But he decides not to discuss the subject any further, so as not to frighten the little girl unnecessarily. Then the loud voice of Domenico Scarelli comes from the office:

*»Marconi, don't make such a fuss! I'm only asking you for a small favor! One hand washes the other!«*

*»Reverend, I can't do what you're asking me to do! I don't spy on my friends and neighbors!«*

The two men in the office conduct their excited conversation in German. Since only a few people in the Vatican are proficient in German, Domenico does not seem to attach any particular importance to closing the door. Jan thus inevitably witnesses the further exchange of words:

*»What do you mean by spying, Marconi? You work on my behalf as an informal employee and write a report now and then. That's not too much to ask! In return, you'll get your turn in the future when we have to assign a translation job. There will be quite a few translation requests in the coming days, I'm sure. You don't want us to give this job to someone else! You know as well as I do: there are dozens of capable translators out there, all just waiting to grab a small job from us! And your fee per line, Mr. Marconi, is not exactly modest either, if you'll pardon the expression!«*

*»Reverend, I have to feed my family somehow. I worked on the last translation for two weeks and could barely pay for food and rent. If I reduce my fee even more, it won't cover my expenses!«*

*»My dear Mr. Marconi, that is precisely why you should consider my proposal again in all tranquility. Remember: Pecunia non olet<sup>38</sup> ! Sleep on it again and then let me know tomorrow whether you are ready to do us this small favor in the future. After all, it should not be to your detriment! Now I must say goodbye to you, unfortunately! I have other important official business to attend to. Please give my regards to your wife!«*

Jan stands there frozen. He can hardly believe what he has just heard. Only little Gianna snaps him out of his thoughts:

*»Why is that man in there talking so loudly to my dad? He'd better watch out! My dad is very strong! If he keeps talking like that, my dad will punch him in the nose!«*

At that moment, Domenico Scarelli and Mr. Marconi come out of the room. Domenico is startled when he sees Jan still standing there. But then he reacts quite quickly and turns to the little girl:

*»Well, little princess – why are you giving Uncle Scarelli the evil eye? Don't you know what we do here at the Vatican with bad girls? Hmmm? We lock them in the dark dungeon in Castel Sant'Angelo and don't let them out until they've been good!«*

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<sup>38</sup> *Pecunia non olet (Latin): Money does not stink*

Little Gianna jerks back and looks at the big man in the black gown in horror.

*»Come Gianna, let's go!« says Signore Marconi in a low voice and takes his little daughter by the hand.*

And under the resounding laughter of Domenico Scarelli the two leave the Apostolic Palace.

## **Railroad**

David and the escape agent talk tirelessly to Gianna. Again and again, she just shakes her head and says in despair that she couldn't possibly let herself be locked in that coffin. The escape officer offers her a tablet with a strong sedative. Gianna, however, vehemently refuses to swallow it. When David declares that he will not go without Gianna, the escape agent begins to tear his hair out in despair. He's about to call the whole thing off and take the two cowards back to the ship. However, he is not sure if the ship is still in the harbor. If not, he would have a huge problem with the illegal presence of the two fugitives in the oil port. So he continues to speak with the tongues of angels to Gianna and tells her how many women and children have already traveled in these wagons - and that so far everyone has come out of the box alive - and how beautiful their life would be in the north - and so on and so forth. When Gianna realizes that she will thwart David's return home with her refusal, she is at least willing to swallow the tranquilizer. Nevertheless, she still cannot be persuaded to finally get into this narrow transport room. The two men continue to talk at her. Like a stubborn mule that will not let itself be dissuaded from its chosen path for anything in the world. Finally, the tablet takes effect. Gianna's eyes become glassy, her movements unsteady and her pronunciation unclear. Then a metallic crash shatters the silence of the night and an enormous jolt goes through the chain of wagons.

*»The locomotive has coupled up to the train!« shouts the escape agent with a desperate look on his face. »It's going right now!«*

*»Oh my God!« Gianna cries indecisively. »What am I going to do?«*

*»At least stuff your backpack in the storage compartments already!«*

»Maybe it will help to create facts,« the escape agent thinks to himself and pushes Gianna's backpack into the opening of the storage box. He crawls deep inside the box himself and pushes the backpack to its rear end. As soon as he crawls out again, the whole train slowly starts to move.

*»Here, girl, I'll give you another tablet in case the effect of the first one wears off on the way! But now you have to get in!«*

Gianna snatches the tablet from his hand and swallows it immediately.

*»Come on, help me get in!« she stammers with a pale face.*

The speed of the wagon is still slow enough for the two men to push Gianna, feet first, into the narrow stowage space. Then they run to the adjacent wagon and throw David's backpack into the opening with momentum. It's just as well that David had already tested lying down in the stowage space once and that the flap had remained open afterwards.

The train picks up speed.

*»How am I supposed to get in there now?« David shouts in despair.*

The escape agent doesn't understand him, but as he walks next to David, he points to the metal bar above the storage space. David immediately understands what he wants to tell him. He grabs the bar with both hands and swings himself to the side of the increasingly fast-moving train car. He holds on as if to a horizontal bar, while his feet seek support on the floor of the stowage space. As the locomotive accelerates more and more, he slowly begins to slide inside, feet first. Inch by inch, he works his way inside. The cool air blows around his nose. Not half a meter below him, he sees the sharp stones of the gravel bed racing past. If he crashes now, there won't be much left of his face! After what feels like an eternity, however,

he has disappeared into the transport box enough to let go of the metal bar. His back crashes onto the hard metal floor of the storage space and the back of his head slams onto the edge of the opening. Pain travels through his body like lightning and stars explode before his eyes. »Damn - that hurt!« he curses as he struggles to get his arms inside and finally disappears completely into the box. There is no longer any sign of his escape agent. But the train has already picked up so much speed that no human could run alongside it.

The escape agent, however, is very much still in the game. While David was busy with his gymnastics exercise, he jumped onto the metal ladder at the end of the tank car and is now riding along as the third passenger on the tank train. He still has a problem: Due to the hectic pace of the departure, he didn't have a chance to close the two transport boxes properly. With the flaps open, however, there is a great risk that the stowaways will be discovered. Thank goodness he knows from experience that the train will stop again briefly before leaving the port area so that the engineer can get a stamp and signature for his freight papers. While he is hanging on the ladder, he is already preparing the two padlocks that are about to be attached. As expected, the train stops again after a while. »Don't waste any time now! Otherwise the little mimosa will change her mind in the end!« While the train is still braking, he jumps off and runs as fast as he can to Gianna's carriage. Hastily he closes the flap with the safety lock. »Well, that's the most important thing done!« he thinks to himself and then continues on to the other carriage. David is astonished when he sees the escape agent in front of him once again. But he only wishes him a quick »Buon viaggio!« and then locks the flap of David's box. »Thank God!« he thinks to himself. »That was a difficult birth!«

David is now in the dark. And this time it's really dark. And this time it stays that way. As the train starts up again, he feels his way to his pants pocket, where he had put the thick ball of absorbent cotton. He plucks off two large pieces and stuffs them tightly into his ears. Then he turns into a reasonably comfortable prone position and rests his head as best he can on

his bent arms. If only he had taken the escape agent's advice and prepared some makeshift padding for himself with linen and towels! Now it is too late. The backpack with the soft clothes lies at his feet and the storage space is much too tight to get to it now. At least he has a thick jacket on, which absorbs some of the vibrations. He wonders how Gianna will fare in her transport box.

In the meantime, the train has picked up full speed. The monotonous rattling of the chassis is transmitted to David's entire body. He wonders how long they've been on the way. For the first time since the robbery in Rome, David misses his wristwatch. Being in this torture chamber completely confuses his sense of time. How long has he been in here? Ten minutes? Thirty minutes? An hour? David has no idea. His only hope is that this nightmare will end as soon as possible. At some point, the pitch of the all-pervasive noise changes. This is probably the tunnel the escape agent had been talking about. Then the volume decreases again somewhat, only to swell again after a few minutes. At times, the rattling of the axles is even drowned out by the squealing of the brakes. Despite the absorbent cotton in his ears, this high-frequency sound makes David's blood run cold every time. The only good thing about it - he tells himself - is that it now seems to be going downhill. Which means that they're probably halfway there now.

It's not long before the train suddenly comes to a complete stop after the brakes squeal for a while. All of a sudden, it's dead silent. David plucks the absorbent cotton out of his ears and carefully puts it back in his pocket. It's quite possible that they're just standing in front of a red signal and the ride is about to resume. He holds his breath and listens. Voices can be heard somewhere. Are these the escape agents finally getting them out of here? But what is that? Is that dogs barking? Hopefully they haven't run into a checkpoint! The voices are getting louder. David hears a few scraps of Italian words. He hardly dares to breathe and his heart is pounding up to his throat. Now he hears footsteps approaching. For a short moment there is silence. Then a dog begins to yelp. Its barking sounds as loud as if the

four-legged friend were here in the storage room with him. In front of the opening flap, human voices also become loud and frantic. Someone begins to tamper with the lock. There is a loud crack and the door of his prison opens swingingly. David looks directly into the bared teeth of a German shepherd. He seems to be deciding whether to wait for his handler's reward or bite off his victim's nose. But a uniformed policeman pulls him aside in time and gives him his treat, while his colleague puts the bolt cutter down on the ground and bends down to David. Before he pulls David rudely out of the storage room, he snaps a pair of handcuffs on David's wrists.

## **Class reunion**

Jan's adventurous business trip to Rome had ended without further incident. From a professional point of view, the meeting in the Vatican was a complete success for him. In human terms, however, it was a bitter disappointment. Domenico had changed a lot over the years. The former idealist and philanthropist had become a career-obsessed cynic. Any form of Christian charity had apparently been completely lost on this man. Instead, the ceaseless pursuit of prestige and power became his all-dominant goal in life. Jan had originally hoped that with the visit to the Vatican he could resume contact with Domenico and cultivate friendship. After the reunion, however, it was clear to him that he wanted nothing more to do with this person once and for all.

In the meantime, however, several years have passed again. Jan is still working at the Foreign Ministry. Time and the years flow by. Slowly and steadily - like the Rhine, whose wide riverbed Jan can look down on from his desk every working day. But today is Saturday. And this Saturday is not like the other Saturdays. Because this Saturday the class reunion is scheduled!

Every five years, Jan meets up with the classmates of his former high school graduation class for the inevitable get-together in the large inn of the small town west of Cologne. Each time, he feels beamed back to a time long past. Each time, the same familiar faces. Always a little older and

outwardly more grown up. But still, behind the meanwhile quite respectable-looking figures, there are still the same pubescent messes from back then. Every time the same old stories are brought out of the mothballs and discussed with lots of beer and wine. Most of the time it is called speech and answer: Who did what? Who failed? Who married whom? Who separated from whom? How many children, what kind of car, where and how do you live? It's almost always the same people who meet every five years at the big inn. At best, half of the graduating class at the time. Some have moved away, some just don't feel like doing this ritual, and a few have already passed away. Mostly due to illness. However, among Jan's classmates, there are a few known cases of someone who fell victim to the unrest in the year of the economic catastrophe.

*»Jan, does that red Porsche outside belong to you?« Max asks with wide eyes.*

*»Yeah, well, you can't treat yourself to anything else! Besides, in our domain you unfortunately only have the choice between Mercedes and Porsche.«*

The disintegration of Germany and the introduction of the river domain system had serious consequences for the former German automotive industry. In the Rhine domain, only the Mercedes plants and the Porsche plants had survived the economic collapse. All multinational corporations were liquidated within a very short time at that time. In Germany, this affected all the major DAX companies. The abrupt end of globalization was followed by the end of globally positioned stock corporations. The individual industrial sites continued to exist for the time being, of course, and were commandeered by the new domain governments. In the early days, however, it was very difficult to return to orderly production processes. In most cases, these were based on sophisticated logistics with globally distributed locations and just-in-time supply chains. A great many industrial companies failed miserably in their attempts to offer their original products again. As far as the automotive industry was concerned, the Rhine domain was still lucky. The Daimler Group had been broken up,



but in the Schwippe.Würm.Nagold.Enz.Neckar.Rhine sub-domain, the Sindelfingen Mercedes plant was able to resume production. For Opel and Ford, however, the lights went out on the Rhine forever. Since they were cut off from their corporate headquarters as well as from important supplier companies, a resumption of car production was out of the question. Only the Porsche company later managed the feat of establishing itself as another automobile manufacturer on the Rhine. With Swabian diligence, great cleverness and the reactivated know-how of former employees, the old assembly lines at the Porsche plant in Zuffenhausen were put back into operation and the slowly growing demand for fast sports cars was met.

In the other main German-speaking domains, the situation was also difficult. On the Weser, the Volkswagen Group had been liquidated. Fortunately, the VW plant in Wolfsburg (Aller.Weser) remained capable of production and was able to deliver its first simple Volkswagen again five years after the crash. The situation on the Elbe was more difficult. The domain government was able to commandeer a few isolated car factories in its river system, but what was missing was a company headquarters that could have formed the center of such a complex industry as the automotive industry. Finally, the long tradition of the production site in Zwickau (ZwickauerMulde.Mulde.Elbe) was remembered and an attempt was made to meet the population's need for mobility with a modernized version of the tried and tested Trabant. Things looked quite bleak in the Ems domain. In the desperate search for their own automotive location, a few megalomaniac managers suggested reactivating the old Karmann plants in Osnabrück (Hase.Ems) and developing and producing an electric variant of the Karmann Ghia there. The fact that the Karmanns had never built their own cars there, but had only ever modified the models of other manufacturers, was regarded by the management as an insignificant technical detail. Only after vast amounts of public money had been senselessly sunk into the project without even coming close to the goal of a prototype, the domain government in Papenburg pulled the ripcord. In

the end, the people on the Ems concentrated on what they were really good at. And that was not building small cars, but large ships.

*»A cousin of mine from Munich now drives a 3-series DKW,« Ralf tells. »He's supposedly very happy with it!«*

*»Boooh man, a 3-series DKW!« I've never seen anything like it driving around here before. Must cost a pig's ass!«*

Max had never been the brightest, and since elementary school no one had taken him completely for granted. Apparently, he still doesn't know what domain Munich is in today. Ralf, who studied German and geography to become a teacher and is considered by many of his former classmates to be a smart-aleck bourgeois, immediately teaches him a lesson:

*»Munich belongs to the Danube domain and there are no other cars to buy except for the DKWs anyway! The problem is the high import duties you have to pay if you want to import such a car here to the Rhine!«*

The former BMW corporation, has also long been history. In the Munich and Dingolfing plants, however, they got their act together quite well after the crash and are once again producing an absolutely successful model: the DKW (Danube Kraftwagen). At the start of production, however, the company management had received some nasty letters from Wolfsburg. VW managers had remembered that they had once owned the naming rights to the DKW brand. But since there is now neither the original VW Group nor any internationally relevant patent or trademark office, these complaints went right up the asses of the DKW managers in Munich.

*»Say Max, are you still driving that old Opel like last time?«*

Ralf can't resist giving his former bench neighbor another kick.

*»Yes, it is - unfortunately. Although it's getting harder and harder to get spare parts for the old jalopy every year. I've long wanted to get a little Mercedes like that, too, but the banks hardly give out loans!«*

*»Are you surprised?« It was all this debt-making that got us into the crash. I already think it's right that we don't make the mistakes again that led us into the disaster.«*

*»What a load of bollocks!« Max grumbles and takes a big gulp from his beer. »My parents always financed their cars through the bank, too, and I don't think that's why the economy collapsed.«*

Jan and Ralf grin at each other. Everyone at the table knows that Max's parents had to file for personal bankruptcy several years before the crash. Apparently no one in this family has ever been able to handle money.

*»Your parents were certainly not the sole culprits,« Jan laughs. »The problem was that the whole world believed it could live permanently on credit. At some point, the process of money creation was completely disconnected from economic reality, so a debt bubble developed that eventually had to burst.«*

*»But the credit system did have one advantage back then,« Ralf says. »You could borrow money at incredibly low interest rates. It's not as if the bank wouldn't give you a loan at all today. But you just have to offer certain collateral and also be willing to pay high interest on the loan.«*

*»Anyway, the bank won't give me a loan,« Max whines, »Those bankers are all criminals!«*

Jan says: *»Other domains, such as those on the Elbe, have even stricter regulations when it comes to granting loans. They have decreed by law that no more money comes into circulation than is covered by gold reserves. And loans are issued there only to the extent that corresponds to the credit balance of the depositing savers.«*

*»Hasn't that always been the case?« Max asks incredulously.*

*»Dream on!« Before the crash, the commercial banks were able to create practically infinite amounts of fiat<sup>39</sup> money out of thin air without any real countervalue. That's what ultimately created these gigantic mountains of debt!«*

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39 fiat derives from the Latin word fiat, meaning "let it be done"

*»That's nonsense! If someone has debts, then there is also someone who is entitled to this money. Someone who is therefore correspondingly wealthy. So there always has to be a balance!«*

*»In theory, yes,« Jan agrees, »but in practice, these assets turned out to be nothing more than an empty shell. The mountains of national debt soared so high that at some point it became clear to all creditors that repayment of their supposed assets was no longer an option. I think our parents can still sing a song about that!«*

*»But there were also states that were pinched!« Ralf replies.  
»Can you still remember how stupid the Norwegians looked back then when their beautiful state pension fund was suddenly no longer worth a penny? For years, they had extracted oil off their coast and put the proceeds into securities. This state fund is said to have been worth more than a trillion euros! The Norwegians wanted to make provisions for the time when the oil reserves in the North Sea would run out. Now everything is gone: oil gone - and money gone! In retrospect, it would have made more sense to leave the oil where it is and to produce only as much as is needed to support the population. I think the Norwegians have learned their lesson!«*

*»Cheers - to the Norwegians!« shouts Max. »May they learn from their mistakes! Still, I can't imagine an economy functioning without borrowing! After all, debt and interest have existed since time immemorial!«*

*»And since time immemorial, that's why there's always been a row,« Jan replies, shaking his head. »Even the ancient religions have always been very critical concerning interest. In Judaism, in Islam and also in Christianity, there was or is a ban on lending money at interest. I believe this has basically nothing to do with religion, but reflects ancient experiences of mankind. A civilization that builds its financial system on interest will sooner or later split into debtors and creditors. Interest and compound interest cause this divide to widen until at some point the imbalance can no longer be maintained and the system collapses.*

*This happened countless times in the course of human history, but we just don't learn from it!«*

*»The bigwigs should have been forced to hand over some of their assets!« Max grumbles and bangs his fist on the table.*

*»Then the bank run would only have happened sooner! Most of the billionaires' assets existed only virtually on paper. They couldn't possibly spend that! How much caviar can a person eat, how many houses can he live in and how many hookers can he fuck? No matter how hard the super-rich tried: The lion's share of their billions remained untouched in their accounts. And that was just as well! If one had distributed this gigantic fortune among the people, one would have realized much earlier that there is no real equivalent value behind it!«*

*»Maybe,« Ralf answers skeptically. »Maybe it would even have been better if the crash had happened earlier. The consequences might not have been so devastating. But today it's pointless to philosophize about it anyway. The past is the past. I am much more interested in how credit should be handled in the future. Do you think that the Elbe domain will keep up its strict approach to borrowing? After all, that's a competitive disadvantage compared to the other domains!«*

*Max rants at the top of his voice: »Of course, the East Germans with their planned economy! They have seen what their socialism has brought them! The GDR went bankrupt many years before the EU! That proves who had the better economic system!«*

*»What does better mean?« Jan says thoughtfully. »In a capitalist system, it has been proven that the national economy grows faster than in a socialist system. This is achieved not least by a sophisticated incentive system for the people and companies. But there can be no endless growth! Neither in nature, nor in the real economy and certainly not in the financial world. I believe the capitalism is like a rampant plant, which takes the light away from all other plants and prevents them so from the growth. It covers and overgrows everything until it eventually runs out of water and nutrients and dies. Socialism, by comparison, is more*

*of a delicate plant, designed more for sustainability and permanence. If it were alone in the world, everything would be fine. But as long as capitalism plays its deadly expansionist game alongside it, it won't get off the ground.«*

*»You're all out of your minds!« Max slurs and orders another beer.*

On this Saturday evening, the old classmates are still chatting long and wide about God and the world. Jan has had far too much alcohol to drive back to Cologne. But he had announced to his mother and sister that he would like to sleep on the guest bed tonight. On the way home, he is accompanied by Max, who apparently still lives in his former childhood bedroom with his old parents.

*»Jan, as you're such a big shot in the government now: could you do me a favor? I'm in a bit of a predicament at the moment. Could you maybe help me out and lend me some money? I'll pay you back as soon as I can!«*

Jan had already heard from several classmates that Max is in debt to many of them. Nevertheless, he cautiously asks him what amount he had in mind. But when Max names the sum he has in mind, Jan just shakes his head in horror and answers:

*»I can't possibly liquidate that much in a hurry! I'll check with my bank about the notice periods for my investments and I'll let you know at the next class meeting!«*

Then he turns into the side street to his parents' house and leaves the stunned Max standing there.

## **Remand**

Immediately after the policemen have pulled David out of the wagon box, they take him to a prisoner transporter. One of the officers pushes him onto one of the hard benches and opens the handcuff on his left hand. But only to connect it to a massive metal eyelet next to the bench seat. Then he leaves David safely fixed inside the passenger compartment and closes the

door from the outside. Frustrated, David yanks on his handcuff. Apart from pain, however, this action doesn't do him much good. He has no choice but to resign himself to his fate and wait. Surely they will bring Gianna in a moment. But nothing happens.

At some point, David can see through the small side window that the train is starting to move again. For a short time, the rattling of the carriages can still be heard. Then the noise becomes quieter and dies away. Silence reigns for several minutes. Until David suddenly hears the sound of sirens. The yelping signal tone gets louder and louder until an emergency vehicle comes to a halt right next to the prisoner transporter. David can't tell if it's a fire truck, an ambulance or another police vehicle. The siren falls silent, but the flashing blue signal light illuminates the night in a wide radius and shines all the way into David's mobile prison cell. »My God, hopefully nothing has happened to Gianna!« he thinks to himself and a cold shiver runs down his spine. For a long time, nothing happens from which David could deduce what is going on out there. Then he hears the sound of a sliding door closing. Shortly after, the screaming of the siren shatters the silence again and the emergency vehicle chases away at high speed. When the siren can no longer be heard, the van door opens. His guard gets in and takes a seat on the opposite bench with a deadpan face. Through a close-meshed grille at the front of the passenger compartment, David can see that the driver of the van has now also gotten in. He starts the engine, switches on the horn and shortly afterwards the van starts moving.

*»Where are we? Where is my girlfriend?« David wants to know from his guard in German and English.*

But he only looks at him boredly and then wordlessly averts his eyes from him again. The trip has hardly begun before it's already over. The distance traveled can only have been a few hundred meters at best. The policemen release David from the bench and handcuff him again. As he is pulled out of the van, he realizes that he is in a large square in front of an old multi-story building. A street is not to be seen far and wide. The area looks more

like a barracks yard. On all four sides, the square is framed by similar-looking buildings. As David is led into one of them, he can read a sign:

*»Corpo Di Polizia Municipale Novi Ligure«*

Polizia probably means police, but he can't do much with the rest. The officers take him through the stairwell to the second floor. There they walk down a long corridor that finally ends at a glass door. One of the policemen presses the bell button and waits for them to be opened. It is not long before another uniformed officer appears and lets them in. He talks briefly with David's guards, who then remove the handcuffs from his prisoner. Then he asks David:

*»Parli italiano?«*

David just shrugs his shoulders. The officer leads him to a table and indicates him to put all the items he has in his pockets on it. A few handkerchiefs and the ear cotton - David doesn't have any more belongings that he could bring to light. The officer indicates to take off his jacket, pull his belt out of his pants and take the laces out of his shoes. After David complies with the request, the officer carefully pats him down all over his body. He then signals to his colleagues that they can take him away.

The corridor through which they pass is easily recognizable as a prison wing. At intervals of a few meters, there are thick steel doors with elaborate locking devices and small viewing windows into the interior of the cells. Walking is quite difficult for David - with slipping pants and open shoes. Fortunately, it is not very far. The first open cell becomes his new home. His watchdogs make sure that everything is okay. Then they leave him alone and lock the door.

The cell is brightly lit. Opposite the door, just below the ceiling, is a small barred window. Below it is a narrow bed. On the opposite wall is a small table, a chair and an empty metal locker. Next to the cell door, between two narrow screens, is a squat toilet of old Mediterranean design. Opposite, on the other side of the cell door, there is a simple washbasin



and a small mirror. The walls of the cell are light and tiled. At first glance, everything seems quite clean. There are even a few packaged hygiene items on the shelf above the sink. David takes off his shoes and lies down on the bed. As soon as he lies down, the light goes out. But it does not go completely dark. There is apparently some kind of emergency lighting in the ceiling lamp, which allows the guards to take a look at what is happening in the cell at any time. David closes his eyes. However, his adrenaline level is still too high to let him fall asleep. Nor does the uncertainty of what has become of Gianna give him any peace. He stares at the ceiling for hours before he finds some sleep.

In the morning, he is awakened by the loud closing mechanism of the door. A young correctional officer wishes him a good morning in Italian and puts his breakfast on the table. Orange juice, coffee, three slices of bread, butter, sausage and jam. David has a huge appetite and doesn't leave a crumb. When the young supervisor picks up the empty tray, David tries to speak to him in German and English. But he just shrugs his shoulders and wordlessly closes the cell door.

The hours pass. Every now and then, David bangs on the door with his fist.

*»I want to speak to the magistrate in charge!« he roars. »I am a citizen of the Danube domain and demand consular assistance!«*

But no one takes care of him. Only when lunch arrives does the cell door open again. While the officer places a large plate of meat, potatoes and vegetables on the small table, David bombards him with countless questions, demands and insults, which he does not understand. At least he makes a gesture, which David interprets to mean that he should be patient a little longer. Hours pass again. Outside, it is already getting dark again. Then suddenly the key turns in the lock, a law enforcement officer enters and asks him to follow him. He leads David to the end of the cell wing and knocks on a door. When he hears a loud »Entra!« he opens the door and leads David into the room. Behind a bulky desk sits a stolid official in a black uniform.

*»I was told you speak German,« he says, to David's great astonishment, pointing with a sweeping gesture to the vacant chair in front of his desk.*

David takes a seat while the correctional officer closes the door and sits in a chair next to the door as a lookout.

*»I can't tell you how glad I am that someone finally understands me!« David replies. »Can you tell me what happened to my girlfriend?«*

*»You mean the young woman we pulled off the train together with you yesterday?«*

*»Yes!«*

*»When we found her in the tank wagon yesterday, she was unconscious. She was taken by the rescue service to the hospital in Alessandria. As far as I know, however, she could already be questioned.«*

David breathes a sigh of relief as the man on the other side of the desk continues:

*»My name is Federico de Angelo. I am a commissario with the local provincial police. You are accused of illegal border crossing into the Po domain. Would you please give me your particulars?«*

*»My name is David Jonas and I am a citizen of the Danube Domain. My permanent residence is in Vienna. I am a computer scientist by profession.«*

*»Do you have any identification? You didn't have any papers on you when you were captured!«*

*»They stole my papers in Rome.«*

*»Why didn't you have replacement documents issued in Rome?«*

*»When I was in Rome - how shall I say - I became a victim of a conspiracy. I was forced to leave the city as soon as possible.«*

*»Is your companion also a citizen of the Danube Domain?«*

*»No, my girlfriend is a native Roman.«*

*»Why did she cross the Po domain border illegally?«*

*»She'll tell you best herself when she's well again. She will get well soon, won't she?«*

*»You'll have to ask the attending physicians, young man!«*

*»May I ask you why you speak German so well?« David asks curiously.*

*»I am originally from South Tyrol and was transferred to the domain Scrivia.Po a year ago. But I would be grateful if you would leave the questioning to me! So you claim that you were the victim of a conspiracy in Rome and were therefore forced to travel back to Vienna on a secret escape route?«*

*»Yes, that is consistent with the facts.«*

*»May I ask, how did you come to Rome?«*

*»I had business in Rome and stayed in Rome and the Vatican City State for a total of three days.«*

*»Did you take the train to Rome?«*

*»Of course not! I flew from Vienna to Rome on my client's private jet.«*

*»By private jet?«*

*»Yes, by private jet. My boss and I were traveling on behalf of the Central Bank of the Danube Domain. Unfortunately, I missed the return flight due to a robbery that was committed against me in Rome. Although - actually I missed it fortunately. The private jet was the victim of a bomb attack on the return flight. You may have heard about it on the news! The plane exploded in the air off the island of Giglio and crashed into the sea!«*

*»Yes, I remember the incident,« the commissario replies, scratching his chin. »If I remember correctly, there were a total of four people on board, all of whom lost their lives.«*

*»Exactly! One of them was me. I mean - the newspapers had reported that I had been on board the plane. But that was a lie! Otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here!«*

*»I see!« the Commissario murmurs and shakes his head. »Can you then provide me with evidence that this story is factual?«*

*»My girlfriend can confirm that everything happened as I told you. Moreover, my relatives and acquaintances in the Danube domain will confirm my identity.«*

*»You were picked up here in Novi Ligure without any luggage. How did you manage the journey from Rome to here?«*

*»Didn't you get our backpacks out of the tanker wagons?«*

*»There's nothing in my records about any backpacks!«*

*»Then they probably continued north by train. We had deposited our luggage at the foot of the stowage compartment. Your colleagues pulled me out of this stowage space quite rudely and apparently paid no further attention to the backpack!«*

*»That's quite possible. Our focus is more on illegal immigrants and not on their luggage. You can, after all, contact the lost and found office of the relevant railroad company if you want to get your things back.«*

*»What's happening to me now?« David wants to know.*

*»We will verify your statements. I therefore ask you, later in your cell, to fill out this form here. Following this interrogation, you will be treated by my colleagues for identification purposes.«*

*»When will I be brought before a magistrate? And how can I apply for consular hold and a lawyer?«*

*»In your case, the law on simplified repatriation of economic fugitives applies. This means that a magistrate will decide on your further detention on the basis of the files. Assume that he will agree to your further detention due to the given risk of flight. We will, of course, consult the embassy of your alleged home domain in Milan. The ambassador there will then decide whether to take action. If you have a lawyer in the local province, you can contact him. If not, the involvement of a lawyer will also depend on the action taken by your embassy. Do you have any other questions?«*

*»So how long do you expect me to be detained here?«*

*»With the best will in the world, I can't tell you that. That depends primarily on whether and when your identity is confirmed by the relevant authorities. If your information is correct and the relevant authorities in Vienna give the green light, there is nothing to prevent you from continuing your journey immediately.«*

*»And what will happen to my girlfriend then?« David asks worriedly.*

*»As you do not have a close family relationship, your cases will be assessed independently. However, if it is confirmed that your acquaintance has the nationality of the Tiber domain, she will in all likelihood be classified as an economic refugee and will be taken back behind the border.«*

## **The eighth commandment**

*»We've got them!« cheers Alberto Bonelli.*

Monsignor Scarelli has just come from early Mass and enters his office when his private secretary rushes at him, beaming with joy.

*»Who do we have?« he asks him in amazement.*

*»Well that David Jonas and that little journalist!«*

*»Both of them? Very good Bonelli!« Scarelli praises his subordinate and closes the door behind him. »Where in town did they get picked up?«*

*»Not here in Rome! In the Po domain, in a little town called Novi Ligure.«*

*»In the Po domain? And the two were together?« Scarelli shouts in disbelief.*

*»Yes! I also cannot explain what these two completely unrelated cases have to do with each other. But we have received a request for assistance from the police department there, which clearly shows that the two were arrested together while illegally crossing the border.«*

*»Those criminals out there are like pesky insects. They probably secrete pheromones<sup>40</sup> to find each other!«*

*»Unfortunately, this is beyond my knowledge. In any case, the police department wants to know if their identities are correct.«*

*»WHAT?« roars Scarelli, pale in the face. »Then this David Jonas has as good as slipped through our fingers! If the Danube domain confirms his identity, he'll be on the next plane to Vienna, chatting about his experiences like an old washerwoman! We absolutely have to send Boris Luganov to Vienna to intercept him in time!«*

*»Maybe there is another possibility!« Bonelli replies mischievously. »For the Viennese authorities, David Jonas has been dead for many weeks. If some economic refugee now claims to be this Jonas, they won't believe it for the time being. So we just have to succeed in getting him extradited to Rome as quickly as possible.«*

*»What specifically does this request for assistance say?«*

*»David Jonas has stated that he was in the Vatican for a three-day working visit. The police department now wants confirmation*

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40 Pheromone: chemical messenger for information transfer between insects

*of his statement. They have attached two photographs of the persons apprehended. They are without doubt David Jonas and Gianna Marconi, the latter apparently in poor condition. Her photo has been taken at a modern equipped hospital bed. Both have apparently been to the hairdresser and have changed their appearance a lot. However, there is no doubt about their identity.«*

*»I see!« Scarelli murmurs, contorting his face into a devilish grin.  
»You know what we're going to do, Bonelli?«*

*»What do monsignors suggest?«*

*»We confirm that David Jonas participated in this working meeting here at the Vatican. We further confirm that at the conclusion of this meeting, he boarded the plane that unfortunately crashed immediately afterwards for unexplained reasons. In addition, we will use our influence with the Council of the City of Rome. The Rome Police Department should send the two fake wanted posters to Novi Ligure, or whatever this nest is called, and in turn ask for assistance, or extradition, of the two wanted criminals. You will be surprised how soon we will see our two runaways again!«*

*»I think this is indeed a brilliant idea, Monsignor. However, what is somewhat in my stomach is the eighth commandment of our Lord, »Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor!«*

*»Oh, Bonelli, that's just a little white lie - not worth mentioning. We have to keep an eye on the big picture and not dwell too long on sideshows. If you want to drain a swamp, you can't ask the frogs! And if you want, we can once again hear each other's confessions.«*

## **Death sentences**

For four days now, David has been sitting in the Novi Ligure remand prison. Since his own clothes had been left in the storage room of the tanker wagon, he was provided with a complete set of prison clothes. At first he had feared that he would have to walk around in these striped

clothes, as he knew them from old movies. But a few months ago, a well-known Milanese fashion company had chosen a creepy dungeon as a spectacular location for a new advertising campaign and, as part of a large-scale sponsorship, had equipped all the correctional facilities in the domain with its new collection. Since then, many of the prisoners are better dressed than they ever were in freedom.

The days in the cell are endless and monotonous. On the first day, David had come out at least once, even if only for the brief interrogation and the subsequent identification treatment. A DNA sample was taken from his oral mucosa with a cotton swab, his face and the back of his eyes were photographed, and the prints of all ten of his fingers were scanned. The procedure had taken over an hour before he was taken back to his cell. One of the guards had thankfully brought him three books to pass the time: a large-format illustrated book about the Ligurian Maritime Alps, an ancient, well-worn edition of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy in Italian, and a richly illustrated cookbook with vegan gourmet recipes from Tuscany.

There is still no sign of life from Gianna. Is she still in the hospital? Or has she been transferred to another prison? The Commissario had mentioned during the interrogation that she had been taken to a clinic in Alessandria. And the escape agent in Genoa had said that they would be taken out of the tanker wagons at that place. It probably wouldn't have been far at all to their destination station.

*»What a fucking stroke of bad luck!« says David, resigned to his fate. »If this stupid check hadn't come, we'd probably be sitting comfortably in a Viennese coffeehouse right now, and I could show Gianna the sights of the domain capital afterwards.«*

Instead, David can now look at glossy photos of mountain landscapes and soggy legumes. After breakfast, David picks up the book by Dante Alighieri, perhaps to learn a few words of Italian. However, he understands absolutely nothing and soon just listlessly turns from page to page. Just as he reaches the "Inferno" chapter, the lock on the cell door turns. Two prison officers enter and ask him unfriendly to come along. They lead him



back down the long corridor to the interrogation room where he had the honor of being questioned by the commissario a few days ago. This time, however, the room is already full of people. When David enters with his two guards, there is already the Commissario de Angelo, two other guards and - Gianna!

*»Gianna! How are you?« David shouts out, beaming with joy, and rushes towards her.*

*»It's okay,« she answers timidly as they lie tightly embraced in each other's arms.*

But David recognizes at first glance that something is wrong with her. Her eyes look devastated and there is more despair than reunion in her voice.

*»Sit down, please!« the Commissario grumbles at her. »This is not the place or the time for sentimentality.«*

The four supervisors brutally tear David and Gianna apart and urge them to sit on the two chairs in front of the Commissario's desk.

*»So, sir!« he begins in an unusually aggressive tone. »It's been a few days now since I was allowed to listen to your story. In the meantime, we have not been idle and have learned a lot about you. Let's start with the more pleasant things: The authorities of the City of Vienna and the Vatican City State have confirmed, in agreement and independently of each other, that a certain David Jonas was in Rome a few weeks ago on a business trip. Both authorities have also confirmed that this David Jonas boarded the plane back to Vienna on the third day of his stay and tragically died in a plane crash. There is not the slightest doubt about the presence of the said David Jonas on board the crashed plane.«*

*»That's nonsense!« David exclaims angrily. »You can see that I'm sitting here in front of you!«*

*»Shut your mouth! Now comes the more unpleasant part: What do you think of this photo, Signore Silvio Massoli?« the*

*Commissario asks and contemptuously throws a sheet of paper across the desk in David's direction.*

David looks suspiciously at the blurred photo on the printout. There is no doubt that he is depicted in the picture. And he's looking pretty grim. Where could this photo have been taken? The surroundings look as if he were in a cellar or even a dungeon cell. But not in such a comfortable cell as in his current domicile, but more in such a walled dungeon, as one knows it from the Middle Ages. Suddenly David remembers. This picture was taken in the Vatican Bank's retreat room, when he had been discussing technical protocol specifications with his IT colleague Enzo Agnesi. There was apparently a surveillance camera in the room that he hadn't noticed.

*»This picture was taken in a meeting room of the Vatican Bank! During this working visit, which I told you about and which has since been officially confirmed.«*

*»Stop with your tall tales«! »The Commissario yells at him with a red head. »This is exactly how I always imagined the meeting rooms of the Vatican Bank to be! Do you want me to tell you where that is? It's in your prison cell in Rome, where you spent the last five years of your life! After you have abused three small girls in bestial way and have killed agonizingly. Do you want to know more, you miserable pig? Do you really want me to read you and your girlfriend all over again what those innocent bambini had to go through before you bled them to death? I can't eat as much as I want to puke! Someone like you should be hung by the balls!«*

*»It's all a pack of lies!« David is outraged. »The Vatican had also spread such a fake story in Rome via the newspaper. At that time they had simply printed a surveillance photo of the hotel reception. That was so bunglingly done that you could even make out details from the hotel lobby on it. Now they've taken the pictures from the bank's surveillance camera and edited them to make it look like I'm in a prison. Take a look at this! Is this what the mug shots look like that you have your recognition service make? They just want to find me and shut me up because I got onto the trail of their bank's dirty dealings!«*

*»Don't take me for an idiot!« the Commissario replies. »I know very well that the standards of an authority like ours cannot be compared with those of these jailers on the Tiber! In any case, I've had enough of your tall tales now. By the way, as far as your girlfriend is concerned, we have also made some interesting discoveries. The city of Rome has now confirmed that she is the wanted Gianna Marconi from the Trastevere district. She has also been wanted for weeks for a traffic offense. However, it is not about some trivial speeding, but about the criminal offense of a hit-and-run with fatal consequences.«*

*Gianna cries out in despair: »I told you earlier that this alleged accident did not happen! My acquaintance Salvatore Pollini was shot by a killer on the pillion of my Vespa and bled to death in my arms. These criminals in the Vatican want to silence me as much as David!«*

The commissario, however, no longer listens to what his prisoners want to say in their defense. For him, this case is closed. Before this interrogation, he had already clarified everything with the competent magistrate. He gets up from behind his desk and pulls an official-looking document out of his pile of files. With a determined voice, he begins to recite the bilingually formulated content in Italian and German:

*»On behalf of the detention judge of the domain Scrivia.Po, the following decision is issued: the detainees Silvio Massoli and Gianna Marconi are guilty of illegal border crossing. Due to the seriousness of the crimes they are charged with in their home domain, immediate repatriation is ordered in accordance with §10 of the Deportation Act for migrants who have committed criminal offenses. The defendants have forfeited any claim to asylum due to the overwhelming burden of proof. The extradition requests of the Tiber domain are granted. No suspensive appeals are allowed against this order.«*

David listens stunned while the Commissario calmly passes the death sentence on Gianna and him. Finally, he can no longer stay in his chair. He jumps up and bends over the desk:

*»Commissario de Angelo! You can't do this! I beg you! If you hand over my girlfriend and me to those criminals in Rome, you are sending us to certain death! Give me the chance to prove my identity! In my homeland there are countless people who will swear that I am David Jonas!«*

But the Commissario only takes a step back, unmoved. Then he addresses his subordinates with a harsh tone:

*»Constable! The interrogation is over. Take the prisoners to their cells!«*

David tries to run around the desk to get hold of this heartless monster. Immediately, however, he is pulled back by two policemen. While one grabs him hard by the shoulders and pulls him back, the other slams his fist into the pit of his stomach with full force. Groaning, David collapses and writhes in pain on the ground. The two policemen grab him roughly by the arms and drag him out of the interrogation room across the corridor back to his cell. On the way, he hears Gianna's desperate shouting. But when the cell door closes behind him, her voice is finally silenced.

The Commissario takes a deep breath. After the six people have left his study, a little peace finally returns to his realm. When his pulse returns to normal, he takes a seat at his desk and flips through the individual documents in the stack of files piled up in front of him. How is he supposed to keep track of this number of cases? He already doesn't know where to start with his work. And now, to make matters worse, his colleagues have installed these infrared cameras at the tunnel portals of the railroad line. With heat sensors and automatic image-processing software, they can now detect any tanker wagon in which a living person is hiding. Presumably, they will now pull one migrant after another out of the train night after night. Until word of the new search method gets around to the smugglers and the action shifts to another escape route. By then, however, he has the deportation prisons full and doesn't know where to put the many people. Frustrated, he reaches for the phone and presses the speed dial of the executive authority in Alessandria responsible for the deportations.

*»Yes, this is Federico de Angelo. When does the next repatriation ship leave Genoa for the south? - The day after tomorrow? - What route will the ship take? - Directly to Catania? - Would it be possible for the ship to make a short stop in Civitavecchia? - Yes, it is urgent! - Good, so it would be possible. How many delinquents can be accommodated on this ship? - Fifty-nine? - Listen, we have to take two delinquents back there from Rome! - Yes, I know how many Africans are sitting here in our deportation centers to be taken away! - Yes, I know what awaits them at the end of their journey! - Just pick two of them, who will then get a few more days of reprieve in God's name! - Yes, I know that sounds cynical, but I'm just doing my duty here! - Yes - Yes - All right! Thank you very much! Buongiorno!«*

## **Cyber Cop**

*»I'm going to quit!«*

Jan doesn't think he quite understood what his friend Kevin just said.

*»What are you going to do?«*

*»I will quit my job at the Cologne city government at the end of the quarter!«*

*»Respect! Starting over again in your old age - that certainly won't be so easy! What are your plans? Or do you want to retire already?«*

*»Bullshit! May I remind you that you are half a year older than me? Just because we're approaching fifty doesn't mean we're old! I'm going to join the Domain Police. They want to expand the cybercrime department and are looking for IT people with professional experience. People like me!«*

*»You're going to be a cyber cop?« Jan asks incredulously.*

*»They officially call themselves IT criminologists or sometimes IT forensic experts, depending on the area of responsibility. But I haven't decided exactly what I'll be doing yet. The possible*

*applications are pretty broad there: credit card fraud, computer sabotage and much more.«*

*»Child pornography?« adds Jan and raises his eyebrows.*

*»Definitely that, too,« Kevin sighs. »There's no area of crime that isn't represented on the Net. I'm sure I won't get bored there anytime soon!«*

*»Just like in the city government!« Jan laughs.*

*»You could say that,« grins Kevin. »Always updating software and resetting passwords for forgetful clerks isn't much fun in the long run! But all joking aside: I've been working at the store since I graduated, and if I don't take this step now, I'll be stuck there until I retire. I am sure that this is the right moment. And the new job is certainly a challenge!«*

*»Do you have to meet the same requirements as in the normal police service? I mean, in terms of fitness and stuff!«*

*»I get a certain age bonus, of course,« Kevin replies, squinting his eyes. »But you're right, though! They won't take you on the force without a certain level of physical ability. But you know how hard I've been trying to work off my bulge lately.«*

Jan is grinning all over his face. He and Kevin often jog along the Rhine together on weekends. In the meantime, Kevin can keep up with Jan quite well. Nevertheless, the two are still worlds apart in terms of fitness. They both want to run in the upcoming Cologne Marathon. Kevin will be happy if he manages the half-marathon distance - regardless of the time. Jan, on the other hand, has always run the full distance in recent years and has regularly finished in the front of the field. The years have left their mark on him, but most of his younger opponents still only see him from behind.

*»Do you guys do firearms training, too, or is it just a desk job?« Jan asks curiously.*

*»Of course we learn to shoot! We do a lot of work on the computer, but at the end of the day, we're real cops who have to deal with the bad guys head-on sometimes.«*

*»Solving pickpockets and such - from stolen cyber money!«*

Jan is amused at the thought that his friend might have to deal with the various cryptocurrencies in the future. He himself had already been confronted with this topic during his studies. The whole theory behind this digital money had irritated him at first, but then increasingly fascinated him: Blockchains, cryptography, private and public keys and everything that goes with it. Even when Jan already had his master's degree in his pocket, the underlying theory was still not one hundred percent clear to him. He found it all the more astonishing that large parts of the population had become enthusiastic about cryptocurrencies in a kind of gold-rush mood. Bitcoin made the start at that time. What initially looked like a playground for computer geeks soon developed into a mass phenomenon which everyone wanted to join in and get rich. The looming financial crash and the declining confidence in the euro fueled the euphoria. In hindsight, the bursting of the Bitcoin bubble even eclipsed the legendary tulip mania<sup>41</sup> from the seventeenth century. When the initial enthusiasm had faded, Bitcoiners had to painfully realize that although vast amounts of electrical energy had been converted into a gigantic data chain for years, this data no longer embodied any value at all because trust in the system had been lost. If people had learned their lesson this time? Probably not! Greed is much too deeply anchored in the human genome to ever be countered by reason. In the course of evolution, it had always been the greediest hunter who could bring the most offspring into the world. After the Bitcoin bubble burst, many more cryptocurrencies came and went. However, governments and commercial banks had learned their lesson from the disaster and henceforth ensured that the monopoly on money would no longer be contested in the future.

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41 Tulip mania: period in the Netherlands when tulip bulbs became an object of speculation.

*»Yeah you go ahead and make fun!« says Kevin. »You're just jealous that I'll be getting so much action in the future while you're just twiddling your thumbs at your desk.«*

Jan pulls down his right eyelid with his index finger, as if to say to Kevin: »Keep your eyes peeled". Then they both have to laugh out loud. They have understood each other.

## **Turchino Pass**

Gianna and David have now spent two more long days in custody pending deportation. Without knowing about each other, they are not far apart at all. The women's wing of the detention center is only one floor above the men's wing. If Gianna were to stamp her feet loudly, David could hear her. But so the two spend their last two days in the Po domain completely isolated from each other.

On the morning of the third day, after breakfast, there is a sudden bustle. Gianna and David get their clothes brought to the cell, which they had worn on the day of their admission. However, they are still without belts and shoelaces. Apparently, the supervisory staff fears that the two might try to escape their impending deportation at the last minute by committing suicide. For an hour, they sit on packed suitcases, so to speak, except that they have neither a suitcase nor any other things to take with them. After another hour of sitting around idly, they are taken out of their cells. Now they are finally allowed to complete their clothing. Probably it would look quite stupid if a delinquent suddenly found himself without pants and shoes during his deportation.

Almost simultaneously, Gianna and David are led out in handcuffs to the large courtyard. Two police buses are already waiting in the spacious area with their engines running. David is pushed into the second one by his guards. The uniformed driver gives him an unfriendly look as he stumbles up the two steep steps. Through the long aisle, he is taken all the way to the back. At first glance, it looks in here like a normal tour bus collecting its passengers for an excursion. To the left and right of the aisle are two



cushioned seats each. David involuntarily recalls a coffee trip he once took in his youthful recklessness. The only thing is that the faces staring blankly at David now don't really fit into this memory. Back then, the bus had been filled with good-humored Viennese pensioners on departure, who only drove home with embarrassed faces on the return trip when they realized that they had been ripped off at a sales event. The passengers here are all black Africans who already look as if they are on their way to the scaffold.

David is placed on the penultimate bench seat and handcuffed to the seat. Directly behind him are two armed carabinieri, who apparently belong to the security guards accompanying the transport. They are very young guys. David estimates them to be maybe eighteen, twenty years old at the most. One is rather corpulent and still has pimples on his face. The other seems rather small and lanky. His long face is dominated by a prominent hooked nose. David is immediately reminded of the old slapstick movies with Laurel and Hardy when he sees the two comical figures sitting there.

No sooner have his guards left the bus again than David sees Gianna also being brought onto it. To his great joy, she is led up to his seat and fixed right next to him. He didn't think these henchmen had that much humanity anymore, but some human being, in this forecourt of hell, still seems to have his heart in the right place. Gianna, too, is immensely pleased to be allowed to sit next to David.

The enforcement officers complete a few more formalities with the bus driver. Then they get off and the convoy begins to move.

*»How are you doing,« David blurts out. »What happened when they took you off the train?«*

*»I don't know myself. The last thing I can remember is how I swallowed the second tablet and I got pushed into that box. After that I had a complete film break. I didn't wake up again until I got to the hospital. When I came to, I didn't know what was going on or where I was at first. I couldn't hear anything and my skull was threatening to burst. Only gradually did I remember the trip by ship and our arrival in Genoa. Then, when the policemen came to*

*my bedside, I slowly realized that something must have gone wrong. At first, though, I couldn't even understand what they were asking me. I must have spent the whole train ride unconscious in this droning coffin without ear protection. Even today, I sometimes still have a whistling in my ears.«*

*»So when did they let you out of the hospital again?«*

*»That must have been two days before this horrible interrogation. But I'm not quite sure even about that. The whole past week seems like a never-ending nightmare. Can you pinch me? Maybe then I'll wake up in Vienna!«*

*»That would be too good to be true!« David answers and nevertheless gently pinches Gianna's thigh with his free hand.*

*»Ow! I think you're right, unfortunately!«*

The police convoy swings along the country road for a while and then joins the well-built autostrada. From then on, it moves swiftly in a southerly direction. Twice it briefly leaves the autostrada to pick up more deportees. But the boarding procedure is quick and routine. One notices that for the officials involved it is just a normal day's work. The first foothills of the mountains soon appear on the horizon, and the further south the bus travels, the narrower the valley becomes into which the wide highway with its endless gray asphalt ribbon nestles.

Gianna and David's conversation has now fallen silent. Both are hanging in their seats in frustration, thinking about what else they could do now to escape their impending extradition to the Roman authorities. To make matters worse, Gianna has to listen in on the conversation of the two young carabinieri sitting directly behind her.

*»Now we're going to take that stupid detour over the Turchino Pass again. I can't tell you how these deportation transports are getting on my nerves!«*

»Me too! If we had driven over the Polcevera Valley as usual, we would certainly have saved half an hour of time and would have been back home earlier.«

»But no, we still had to collect those six bimbos so they could reach their ship in time. That's perverse. We make a big fuss here and transport them all the way to Sicily, only to have the bandits down there do the dirty work.«

»Why?«

»Well - haven't you ever noticed that none of all these deportees ever showed up here on the bus a second time?«

»Why should they? After all, that's what we're bringing them back for.«

»So if I were in their shoes, I'd keep trying until I finally made it. But if you ask me, they make short work of them down there. Our government has negotiated repatriation agreements with all African countries, where they get cash money for every migrant they send back. But only the first time. Otherwise, they would sic their entire population on us and get paid every time.«

»That would be a great business model! There I must think about it!«

»No - nonsense! They've already negotiated that it only works once. So the Africans pick up their refugees in the port of Catania and bring them back across the Mediterranean. Do you think they have any interest in them arriving alive in Africa?«

»Nope, why?«

»Exactly! If you ask me, they'll all be thrown into the sea as soon as the ship is far enough from shore.«

»You could be right. The way everyone's looking, they probably already know exactly what they're in for! But so what? It's their own fault! Why didn't they stay home?«

»Yeah, I agree.«

*»But the two in front of us are definitely not from Africa. Did you hear how weird they talk to each other?«*

*»Yes I did! Middle East, maybe? Syria, Afghanistan - something like that.«*

*»The chick looks hot in any case! I wouldn't push her off the edge of my bed!«*

*»Me neither! Shall we ask her if she's up for a quickie?«*

*»Hey Ragazza! Do you want to suck on my hard northern Italian flagpole?«*

*»That's right! Ditch your camel jockey and give us a blowjob!«*

The pimply face and the hooked nose are slapping their thighs with laughter, while Gianna can't even roll her eyes as much as she would like to right now. However, she firmly resolves to pay no further attention to these pubescent idiots and to pretend that she doesn't understand Italian. When the bus finally drives through several highway tunnels and it gets dark inside the passenger compartment, however, the two carabinieri quickly lose interest in their boring prisoners and return to discussing more serious topics.

*»We're about to get to the Turchino Pass. My grandpa used to tell me about it when I was a little boy.«*

*»Why? What's about this pass?«*

*»Well - that they still knew how to make short work of prisoners back then!«*

*"When? Why?"*

*»There must have been a massacre during the war there. The Germans shot a few dozen partisans in retaliation. For every dead German, ten Italian partisans. But it was all according to the law! Although this went through the media after the war, the responsible German officers were never punished.«*

*»Rad! We should do the same. Although - actually, those fucking Germans murdered our compatriots! It would have been better the other way around!«*

*»Nope - my grandpa said his grandpa also fought with the Germans back then and the partisans deserved their just punishment.«*

After this somewhat superficial discussion of the tragic events that actually took place here at the end of the Second World War, the two young carabinieri ponder for a while about what is meant by justice and which side is the good and which the bad. Meanwhile, the police convoy is already hurtling down the sloping highway toward the sea. Every now and then, Gianna and David catch a glimpse of the blue glittering mirror deep below them, and each time a shiver runs down their spines. Finally, they reach the outskirts of Genoa and just a few minutes later, the two buses pull onto the expansive harbor area and stop on a pier. David, who is sitting right at the window, is almost struck by the sight of the ship lying in front of them in the harbor. Gianna, however, is busy elsewhere. Like a lynx in waiting position, she waits for the moment when the carabinieri finally free her from her seat. When she then stands in the aisle of the bus for a brief moment face to face with her pimply guard, she seizes the opportunity and rams her right knee into his soft parts with such force that he falls to the ground as if struck by lightning.

*»I think your flag is at half-mast!« she calls out to him with a sneer, while the other guards pounce on her together and overpower her.*

One prisoner after the other is freed from his seat and led onto the ship in handcuffs. Gianna is one of the first to take her turn, and while she is still being dragged off the bus, she witnesses how the whimpering pimple-face has to listen to another scolding from his superior:

*»If you can't even guard a girl, you've missed your calling! There will be consequences for you!«*

Shortly afterwards, it is David's turn and he is led off the bus. As he stands in front of the ship, he has final certainty: it is the same rusty soul-seller that brought Gianna and him here to Genoa from Livorno a week ago. As his eyes wander up to the steering bridge, his eyes cross those of the Comandante, who from his lofty observation post on the bridge deck is calmly watching the prisoners' entry. David is sure he must have recognized him as well. His startled look gave him away, even though he remains standing up there completely motionless. The policemen take David inside the ship. This time, however, they only go down one deck to the mess deck. In a former recreation room for the crews is the end of the line. David sees Gianna already sitting on one of the benches. He indicates to his guard that he would like to take a seat next to her. But he just pushes him aside and fixes him on another bench some distance away from her. Gradually the room fills up with the other prisoners. One by one, men, women and even small children are brought onto the ship one by one and handcuffed to what appear to be specially prepared fastening bars. David begins to count through the people. He gets to the number fifty-nine when the flow of prisoners breaks off and a crew member closes the heavy barred door to the prisoners' room and locks it from the outside. He had also seen this man on the way here. Slowly it dawns on him why the Comandante definitely did not want them to make contact with the crew during the crossing.

*»Gianna!« he shouts loudly over the heads of the other inmates.*

*»Did you see? We're back on the same ship as a week ago!«*

*»Yes!« she shouts back just as loudly. »That pig of a captain is playing a double game. First he brings the refugees here for a lot of money and then he collects money from the government for bringing them back!«*

But then their ability to communicate is abruptly interrupted. The captain has started the engine and a monotonous hum fills the prisoners' deck. Some of the people begin to howl, scream or whimper heartbreakingly. Gianna and David have no way to communicate anymore. But the two no

longer feel like talking anyway. In the meantime, they have no hope of escaping their fate. In a few hours they will be handed over to the Roman authorities. Now a miracle would have to happen. They are irritated that the ship lies in the harbor with the engine running for so long and does not finally leave. An hour passes. And another hour passes. Then suddenly the Comandante himself comes to the barred door. He is accompanied by a distinguished gentleman in a dark suit. The Comandante opens the barred door and enters the prison deck with his companion. In a loud voice, the well-dressed man calls out in German to the crowd:

*»Mr. Jonas? Is there a Mr. David Jonas among those present?«*

*»Here! I'm David Jonas,« David shouts, his heartbeat almost stopping.*

*The man comes to him and says: »My name is Claudio Gatti. The Council of the City of Genoa has sent me. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Danube Domain has contacted our Council President on a very urgent matter. Something seems to be wrong with your fingerprints. You are to accompany me to the City Hall without delay!«*

The shrill cry of jubilation that David lets out at this moment abruptly silences Signore Gatti.

## **Honor Day**

*Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday, Dear Elvira,  
Happy birthday to you*

The hall of the inn in the small town west of Cologne is well filled as the guests loudly cheer Jan's mother.

Elvira Eckert turned eighty yesterday. Jan and Anna invited all of their mother's relatives and acquaintances to the inn for lunch. She herself had no idea how many people there would want to toast her health. Anna had led her to believe until the very end that they only wanted to dine there in

the immediate family circle. When the jubilant sees the many well-wishers, she is moved to tears.

In recent years, Elvira Eckert's health has declined quite a bit. Jan is glad that Anna and Lena live in the same house with her and check on her regularly. The three of them now form a three-generation community. For some time now, Grandma Eckert has only been able to get around with the help of her walker and therefore spends most of her time on the first floor. Her memory is also failing her more and more often, so that running her own household would no longer be an option. With a little help from her daughter and granddaughter, she still manages quite well and, in addition, a nurse from the nursing service comes by twice a day to help her get dressed and undressed.

After the champagne reception, there will be two hours of extensive dining. Afterwards, speeches are made and poems are recited. The ladies from Elvira's old bowling club particularly excel at this. In their eagerness, they don't even notice that the apparently unavoidable Cup-poem is recited twice - but that doesn't dampen the good mood. Jan is pleased that the old folks are in such a great mood and admires the huge circle of acquaintances that his mother has built up in her hometown over the course of eighty years.

After coffee and cake, the party slowly disperses. When the last guests have said goodbye, the Eckert family and their relatives go home, where Anna and Lena have prepared a small evening snack.

*»Well, sister, how are you doing?« Jan asks Anna. »I heard you're the city treasurer now!«*

*»Why should you be the only one in the family to have a career? Apparently, people trust me to do the job. I'm okay with it!«*

*»And so how are the finances in our small town?«*

*»I can't complain. We have a balanced budget. If we didn't have to cross-subsidize other municipalities, it would look even better!«*



*»Who are the culprits this time?«*

*»Well, just the usual suspects from the Ruhr.Rhine domain. Due to structural change, the cities there are still unable to stand on their own two feet and need outside help.«*

*»Are you going to deny them?«*

*»The question does not arise for us at all. Since we all belong to the Rhine domain, we are part of a solidarity community. Whoever wanted to evade responsibility would have to declare his withdrawal from the Rhine domain. For a municipality, like ours, that would be economic suicide!«*

*»Isn't that tempting for the poor communities, that they can live at our expense?«* Lena asks her mother. *»I mean, why should they make an effort on their own when they have the money shoved up their asses!«*

*»Lena, please moderate your language!«* Anna admonishes her adolescent daughter. *»You're not among your fellows here! But you can already believe me that it's not so funny for a city to hang on the drip of the main domain. They have to have every major expense and budget approved from above, and they hardly have any room for maneuver when it comes to making their own decisions. It's no wonder, therefore, that people are leaving there in droves. I recently talked to the treasurer of Mülheim. He can still remember the time before the crash. He says that many municipalities used to be up to their ears in debt and could only meet their expenses by taking out more and more cash advances. The zero interest rates at the time had made the situation even worse, because it was possible to fill the tight coffers with cheap borrowed money. But it was clear to everyone that they would never be able to repay these debts. On the contrary, the crash was initially seen as a good opportunity to get rid of old debts in an elegant way!«*

*»Oh, kids!«* Elvira Eckert intervenes in the conversation. *»Don't you have anything better to talk about on this day? We want to*

*celebrate my birthday and not conjure up the ghosts of the past!  
Jan, do you know that little Lena has a boyfriend lately?«*

*»Is that so?« Jan grins. »What's his name?«*

*»Peter,« Lena answers sheepishly. »Grandma, you're embarrassing!«*

Jan can't help but think of his father when he hears the name Peter. He didn't even know that this name was in use again today. He really only knows old men who are still called that.

*»Jan, our guests are sitting on dry land!« his mother admonishes him with a reproachful look. »Would you be so kind as to bring us a few more bottles of wine from the cellar?«*

As Jan walks past the boiler room, some long-repressed painful memories return. He is now almost as old as his father was when he committed suicide down here. What would have happened if he hadn't made such a cowardly getaway back then? Would he still be alive today? His eightieth birthday would have been long behind him by now, but he had a healthy nature and he never really missed anything.

*»Oh you old fool!« Jan thinks to himself. »If only you would have not lost courage back then. How much you have missed over the years!«*

## **Motherly love**

Claudio Gatti has David's handcuffs removed and asks him to leave the ship with him.

*»Wait a minute! What's going to happen to my girlfriend?« David asks.*

*»Excuse me?« Gatti replies, confused.*

*»My girlfriend, Gianna Marconi. I'm not getting off the boat without her.«*

*»I have not been told about a Mrs. Marconi. I would like you to follow me now. We have delayed the captain for far too long! His ship should have sailed long ago.«*

*»Take it easy! It took long enough for your authority to finally notice the mistake it had made regarding my identity. My girlfriend's case is very similar to mine. She was also wrongly brought here on this ship and if she is now brought back to Rome against her will, her life is immediately threatened!«*

*»I am very sorry Mr. Jonas, but my only instructions are to get you off this ship, clarify any ambiguities regarding your identity, and then transfer you to your home if necessary. I am in no way responsible for the fate of this Mrs. Marconi. Now, would you please follow me!«*

David begins to despair at the stubbornness of this bureaucrat. He considers whether he should return to his seat and escalate the situation by staging a sit-down strike. But then he would probably just be dragged off the ship by force and Gianna would be lost. He thinks for a moment and puts all his eggs in one basket with a daring bluff:

*»Now listen to me carefully! You're talking about my fiancée here and not about some Mrs. Marconi. My fiancée is three months pregnant. If you think I'm going to abandon her and my child just because your stupid regulations say so, then you've got it all wrong! You said yourself that the foreign ministry of the Danube domain has intervened in my case. I know the Foreign Minister personally and I can promise you that you will not be happy in your life if you do not bring my fiancée and my unborn child to safety immediately! The media in all domains of Europe will already report tomorrow about what you, Signore Claudio Gatti, are for a cold-hearted pedant! The shitstorm, which will break over you and your authority, you cannot imagine in your wildest dreams! Do you really want that?«*

Gatti breaks out in a cold sweat. He stands there with his fists clenched so tightly that the knuckles of his fingers protrude bloodlessly. He doesn't know what to do. Finally he says to David:

*»I don't mind! We'll settle the matter with my superiors at the City Hall.« And turning to the captain, he adds in Italian,  
»Comandante, please untie this woman! I don't want to keep you from sailing any longer.«*

Gianna gives the comandante an icy look while he takes off her handcuffs. Before she leaves the prison deck with David and Gatti, she hisses a soft »Judas!« at him and spits in front of him.

A black luxury limousine is waiting in front of the ship, its chauffeur, smoking a cigarette, pacing up and down impatiently. When he sees his boss disembark with two people, he immediately opens all the doors. Gianna and David take a seat in the rear, while Gatti gets in the front. The heavy hybrid vehicle rolls away almost silently. It leaves the area of the oil port and turns onto the busy coastal road. The closer they get to the city center, the heavier the traffic becomes. Gianna can't get out of her amazement. Compared to Rome, this Genoa is on another planet. The streets are full of modern electric cars. Wherever you look: Everywhere there is a lively confusion. The traffic seems to obey no fixed rules, but flows swiftly and steadily. There is honking, pushing and swearing. When Gianna notices how breakneckly the driver of an e-scooter weaves his way through this chaos, her pulse quickens and her hands moisten. At least this daredevil doesn't have to watch out for potholes. All the roads are in excellent condition. In general, the whole city looks as if it has been spruced up. The facades of the houses are clean and intact. There is no trash lying around anywhere. The whole scenery seems somehow unreal. Like in a movie. And Gianna sits on the soft leather seat of this air-conditioned luxury car as if in a box and lets the fantastic impressions pass her by. Once in her life she had seen such an automobile driving through the streets of Rome. It had supposedly been the pope's limousine. Because of the dark windows, however, it was impossible to tell whether he was really sitting in it. She had never dreamed that she herself would one day sit in such a vehicle.

*»The city traffic of Genoa seems to impress you quite a bit!«  
David snaps her out of her thoughts.*

*»Yes - what a difference from Rome! I find it all tremendously exciting, but also a little scary.«*

*»Yes, you will look in vain for horse-drawn vehicles here! But wait until you see Vienna! This Genoa is indeed beautifully situated - so between the mountains and the sea. But because of that, everything seems somehow narrow and squeezed together. In Vienna, everything is much more spacious and open!«*

The limousine reaches the historic city center and the car-free zone. The driver stops in front of two massive metal bollards that make it impossible to continue. »Aha, this must be the end of the line,« Gianna thinks. But the bollards suddenly start flashing red and, as if by magic, slowly disappear into the ground. When the way is clear, the limousine continues its journey over the old cobblestones and finally disappears into the underground garage of a palazzo on Via Garibaldi. They are now under the city's town hall. Claudio Gatti enters with Gianna and David the part of the palazzo that is not open to the public. Down several wide marble staircases and along long corridors decorated with paintings, he leads them to the official rooms of the city council. In a small antechamber he asks them to take a seat and disappears into one of the adjacent offices. After a few minutes he returns, accompanied by an older gentleman, also very smartly dressed. When they get to know each other, it turns out that he is the second mayor of the city, Emilio Galliano. However, since he does not speak German, he turns to Gianna after greeting David with a friendly handshake:

*»So you are Signora Marconi. My speaker has already told me that you are the fiancée of Mr. Jonas. I would also like to welcome you here in Genoa and apologize for the adverse circumstances!«*

Gianna thanks him artfully and somewhat embarrassedly for the friendly reception. This man is immediately much more likeable to her than that

office clerk Gatti. Unfortunately, this one takes over the conversation again:

*»Mr. Jonas, we will be switching to a conference call with the Danube Domain State Department in a few minutes. I will be in charge of the call. I ask you and your fiancée to speak only when asked. The mayor will also attend the conference as a listener. Now, if you would please follow me!«*

The four leave the anteroom and enter a sumptuously furnished hall that apparently serves as a meeting room. With full seating, there would easily be room for a hundred people. However, due to the circular arrangement of the conference tables, the room currently only has room for about twenty people, which still seems plenty oversized for the four of them. David notices that there are already two uniformed people in the room. Their pistol holsters make them easily recognizable as security guards. Gatti pays no attention to them and leads his companions to the head of the conference table, where there is a huge flat screen monitor. David is familiar with these rolling conference systems. It is the same model that is used for his project conferences. The camera at the top of the screen is pointed at the tables in such a way that the remote conferees have a good view of everyone present. Claudio Gatti awkwardly begins to set the conference system in motion. When he still fails miserably with the technology after five minutes, David decides to help the poor man out of his embarrassment. He presses the screen's touch display a few times and routinely navigates the menus until he reaches the list of recent video calls. When Gatti recognizes the green telephone receiver icon next to the "Vienna" entry, he beams all over his face and proudly presses the button that initiates the instant connection. There are a few beeps from the side speakers, then the TV picture changes and a scantily clad woman appears:

*»Casa Vienna - Hello Claudio! What a surprise! You are early today! Do you want to make an appointment with us or should one of the girls brighten up your boring office afternoon with a little cybersex?«*

With his head high in red, Gatti jumps to the screen and presses the red button to end the connection.

*»Wrong number!« he stammers sheepishly as he scrolls through the phone list.*

On his second attempt, he dials the entry "Ministero degli Affari Vienna". The phone rings again and this time a respectably dressed gentleman appears on the other end of the line.

*»A warm greeting to Genoa!« announces the called conference subject.*

*»Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary of State,« Gatti replies. »I'm glad you could make it on such short notice to speak with us.«*

*»I'll be happy to take the time, Mr. Gatti. You know how important this matter is to us. I see you are not alone in the room this time. Would you please introduce me to the other people present?«*

*»With pleasure, Mr. Secretary of State. On my right you see Signore Galliano, the second mayor of the city of Genoa. Unfortunately, Signore Galliano speaks only a few words of German. However, since this case is now being dealt with at the highest level here in Genoa, he has asked me to take part in this conference. If you have any questions for the mayor, I would be happy to translate them for him. The young man on my left is David Jonas. We have been able to locate him in Genoa and he was kind enough to accompany us to the town hall. Next to him you see his fiancée, Signora Gianna Marconi. I hope you have no objection to her attending this conference as well.«*

*»No, I think that's all right! Mr. Jonas, I would also like to introduce myself briefly to you. We haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet. My name is Braunweger, Doctor Braunweger, and I am State Secretary at the Foreign Ministry. Mr. Jonas, you have caused quite a stir here in Vienna with your robbery story!«*

*»I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary of State,« David replies sheepishly.  
»That certainly wasn't my intention. If it had been up to me, the past few weeks would certainly have been a little different.«*

*»Mr. Jonas, until yesterday we firmly assumed that you were on board the private jet that crashed. Can you explain to me in a few words how it happened that, despite the multiple confirmed reports of the Roman and Vatican authorities, you were not on board that plane and instead were arrested as an illegal immigrant crossing the border into the Po domain?«*

David patiently recounts in great detail everything that has happened in the past few weeks. From the working visit to the Vatican Bank, the robbery in the station district, the forged newspaper articles, his escape to the north, and finally his arrest at the border. After he has finished his lecture after half an hour, the secretary of state says:

*»Mr. Jonas, these are very serious accusations that you are making against the Roman authorities and against the Vatican State in particular! Are you sure that there could not have been a misunderstanding? Why did you not contact the Vatican after this attack? Maybe everything would have cleared up!«*

*»Mr. Secretary of State, when I was able to think about my future again after the attack, several people were already dead! All signs pointed to the fact that the masterminds of these crimes must be influential people in the Vatican. If I had not gone into hiding, they would surely have killed me as well. Even after my capture in the Po domain, these criminals almost succeeded in getting me repatriated to Rome with their false accusations. Had you not stopped my extradition at the last minute, this matter would probably never have come to light!«*

*»I think you are really exaggerating, Mr. Jonas. Our domain has maintained the best relations with the Vatican State for many years and you should really think about the accusations you are making! However, I would like to steer our conversation in another direction. I'm sure you understand that we have already gone through several scenarios regarding your identity and the truthfulness of your statements.«*

*»Are you saying you still don't believe I'm David Jonas?«*



*»Let's put it this way: there is a lot to suggest that you are telling us the truth regarding your identity. The fingerprints sent to us by the police in Novi Ligure match those of David Jonas to a high degree. However, in order to dispel any last doubts, I would now like you to join someone in this conference. Do you have any objection to that?«*

*»No, not at all!« David replies. »Who are we talking about?«*

*»Let us surprise you!« the state secretary replies and starts fiddling with his conference system.*

On the screen, the large-screen representation of the remote party suddenly shrinks until it can only be seen in the upper right corner. The rest of the screen has gone black. Suddenly, the image of a woman appears on the monitor. David's jaw drops.

*»Mom! Is that you?«*

David's mother, however, is speechless at first. After the first moment of shock, she stammers:

*»David! Is that really you? My God, you're actually alive! What happened to your hair?«*

*»Yes, I'm fine! I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you sooner, but I was cut off from any communication. How is Dad?«*

*»He's fine! Well, he took his heart medication and shouldn't be upset. Yesterday, when the government called us and said you might be alive after all, he had a mild heart attack. You have no idea what we've been through the last few weeks! Dad is in the bedroom right now resting a bit. Wait a minute, I think he's just coming!«*

David sees how his father now also appears in the parental living room.

*»David? Where the hell have you been? How could you do this to your mother and me?«*

*»Sorry! I'll explain everything when I get back home. I really didn't have a chance to send you any sign of life.«*

David witnesses his parents sitting on the old living room sofa, visibly struggling for composure. Tears of joy run down both their faces when they see their son, who they thought was dead, alive and kicking on the TV screen.

*»Mrs. Jonas,« Dr. Braunweger speaks up. »So you are quite sure that this person is your son David?«*

*»Of course I'm sure!« sobs David's mother.*

*»Then I want to thank you so much for supporting us!«*

*»I have another question for Mrs. Jonas!« Claudio Gatti suddenly interjects. »Do you know the young lady sitting there next to your son?«*

David scowls at Gatti and then turns directly to his mother:

*»Mom, this gentleman here doesn't want to believe that I've been engaged to Gianna for a year! Would you please tell him that this is true! In the end, these bureaucrats won't let Gianna leave with me otherwise.«*

David knows his mother well enough to know that she will see through this white lie and support him as best she can. It only takes a moment for her to recognize her son's intention. For a few fractions of a second, she examines with maternal interest the sympathetic-looking young girl at her child's side. Then she answers in an indignant voice:

*»Of course what my son says is true! Don't you dare put any more obstacles in the way of our family! Haven't you caused enough mischief already?«*

And the state secretary in Vienna also agrees with her:

*»Mr. Gatti, this is really not the time for such pettiness! Since the identity of Mr. Jonas has been established beyond doubt, I would*

*like to ask you to arrange the return flight for him and his fiancée as soon as possible!«*

*»As you wish, Mr. Secretary of State,« Gatti replies meekly. »The next plane from Genoa to Vienna leaves tomorrow evening. Until then, Mr. Jonas and Mrs. Marconi will, of course, be our guests.«*

Dr. Braunweger thanks David's parents for their support and then disconnects them. He then turns back to his interlocutors in Genoa:

*»Good, then everything is clear so far! I still have one request for you, Mr. Jonas: Don't talk to anyone about this matter for the time being! We will pick you up at Vienna airport when you arrive and take you to the Foreign Ministry. There we will meet in person. I am already looking forward to it! If there are no more questions from you, Mr. Gatti, or from the mayor, I think we are done for today.«*

Gatti casts a questioning glance at his employer. But he has obviously been fighting fatigue for some time and shows no interest in dragging out this conference unnecessarily.

*»We have no further questions at the moment. Thank you very much Mr. State Secretary for the interview and best regards to Vienna!«*

Gatti ends the video conference and briefly reports the contents to the mayor. Although the latter had not understood much, it had become quite clear to him during the course of the conversation that there was at least no longer any doubt about the identity of the young man. When Gatti has finished his brief summary, he gives him an assignment:

*»Please see to it that the two young people are put up in a decent hotel. And give them a money card from the administration so that they can go shopping a little. They don't seem to have anything more than the clothes on their backs. Charge the card properly with money! Our domain has not exactly covered itself with glory in this matter. I don't want us to have the reputation of being stingy after all the embarrassing incidents! Do you understand me?«*

## Excursion

Rudolf Keller waits anxiously at the agreed meeting point. He hasn't come across such a lucrative order in a long time. And it comes at the right time. Because life is hard and this job will bring his strained financial situation halfway back into balance. Rudolf Keller is a geologist. Even a geologist with a doctorate! But for years he has earned his bread and butter mainly by driving cabs. Occasionally he gives a few lectures at the adult education center in his hometown of Donaueschingen. In front of interested pensioners he lectures about the geological peculiarities of the Swabian Alb and if he is very lucky, he may even lead an excursion through the local nature parks at the upper reaches of the Danube. Unfortunately, not much money comes out of all this. It's too little to live on and too much to die on.

But Rudolf Keller is still young. Thirty years is actually not much for a doctor of geology. Nevertheless, his parents and his girlfriend keep asking him when he will be able to make a living from his geology. He always tells them about the book project he is working on and about the geological secrets of the Swabian Alb, which only he knows and which will soon make him a sought-after specialist in his field. Certainly - the years after the economic crisis were hard, and for a while he had actually toyed with the idea of retraining as a software developer. But today, after all, it's the year 2052 and the trees are growing into the sky again.

Maybe his new career as a private lecturer starts right now! A hobby geologist has engaged him namely the whole today for a private tour! The man had transferred the half of the demanded fee without complaint in advance on his account and tonight there is the rest cash on the hand. Without invoice! »Fortune favors the brave!« Rudolf Keller thinks to himself as he waits for his mysterious customer at the disused military training area of the small town Immendingen.

Almost on time, a black Mercedes turns onto the narrow gravel road and stops right next to his antique Peugeot. The license plate reveals that it is a rental car.

*»Mr. Keller?« the man asks after he has left his car. Rudolf Keller nods friendly and silently.*

*»Good day! My name is Popov - Igor Popov. It's nice that it worked out with our appointment on such short notice. Unfortunately, we had only had the pleasure via e-mail so far.«*

Rudolf Keller had already suspected from the name in the e-mail that his client might be a Russian. The harsh Eastern European accent of his counterpart, however, now brings him final certainty.

*»Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Popov. You had written me that you were interested in the Danube sinkhole.«*

*»Right! In my spare time, I deal with geological features and since I have to do professionally just once here in the area, I thought I see this famous Danube sinkhole once with my own eyes. I am all the more pleased that I have found in you such a profound connoisseur of the matter and that you take the time to explain it all to me in peace.«*

*»You are welcome, Mr. Popov. It is my special pleasure to show you this unique geological phenomenon. I suggest that we stop at the following places for this purpose: First, I will show you the Brühl sinkholes, where the Danube is currently once again completely seeping away - or sinking, as we geologists say. After that, we will drive to Fridingen, where I will show you the hydroelectric power plant and the sinkhole in the Danube bend there. And finally, we will drive to the Aachtopf, where the Danube water emerges again and flows off via the Radolfzeller Aach to the Rhine. Is that to your liking?«*

*»Yes, quite wonderful! Let's do it that way! I'm relying entirely on your expertise there!«*

The two men get into the small Peugeot and drive a short distance before parking again and Rudolf Keller leads his guest down to the almost completely dry Danube bed.

*»We are now directly above the main sinking point. For about half of the year, just like today, the Danube completely sinks into*

*its riverbed here and then flows through underground chambers and cave systems toward the Rhine. It can be proven with chemical substances that exactly this water resurfaces after some time at a distance of fourteen kilometers from here. Namely in the Aachtopf spring, which we will visit later.«*

*»Aren't there any problems with the water supply here in the area if the Danube disappears into the ground just like that?« asks Igor Popov.*

*»Oh yes!« laughs Rudolf Keller. »As early as 1927, the then still independent states of Baden and Württemberg fought over the water rights to the seeping Danube water. At that time, they had even temporarily blocked the seepage holes to prevent it from flowing towards the Rhine. At that time, the dispute was heard by the State Court of the German Reich!«*

*»Can you pinpoint these seepage holes, then?«*

*»Come with me, Mr. Popov,« Rudolf Keller grins and leads his guest to a bush on the dry riverbank.*

*»You see the little pipes coming out of the ground here? During my studies, my professor at the time drilled some test holes here to investigate the exact drainage paths of the infiltration holes. At that time, we filled these pipes with the chemical substances we used to study the drainage system.«*

*»Really very interesting!« Igor Popov agrees with him, looking serious.*

Rudolf Keller explains a thing or two about the underground karst water systems of this area to his guest before they get back into the car and drive the thirty kilometers down the Danube to the small town of Fridingen.

*»We are now at the place where the little river Bära flows into the Danube. As you can see, the riverbed here has already recovered from its water loss. The Danube is fed by many tributaries. In front you can see the weir, behind which the Fridingen Danube loop begins. But most of the water already flows before that, via*

*that power plant there in front, into the artificially created Danube tunnel.«*

*»This little bit of water can actually be used to generate electricity?«*

*»You bet! The usable drop height of the water is only sixteen meters, but that's enough to generate about four gigawatts of electricity over the whole year!«*

*»Really!« Igor Popov grins. »You seem to be a universal genius!«*

*»But the power plant tunnel also has another decisive advantage: because the Danube water does not flow over the original Danube bend, but takes a shortcut, so to speak, through the tunnel, it escapes the sinking point there and remains in the original river system!«*

*»That is, if this adit did not exist, much of this water would drain underground toward the Rhine?«*

*»Exactly! Mr. Popov, I can see you have a good grasp! Most of my students at the adult education center have big imagination problems as far as these invisible waterways are concerned.«*

Igor Popov asks his guide for a brief look at the power plant. The geologist is only too happy to grant his wish and willingly shows him everything worth seeing at the entrance to the tunnel. Finally, the two get back into their car and drive to the not far away seepage points at the Fridingen Danube bend. Rudolf Keller loves this place. He leads his guest along a barely recognizable trail through a small wood down to the riverbed. The path ends directly at the water and opens up a magnificent view of the Upper Danube Nature Park. Rudolf Keller's heart almost sinks as he gives his talk about the infinite beauty of this valley carved out of the Jura rock by the Danube. With shining eyes, his gaze wanders over the bizarre limestone rock formations and the forested hilltops of this uniquely beautiful landscape - his homeland.

If only he would look behind him! Behind his back, Boris Luganov, alias Igor Popov, pulls a Russian-made 9 mm pistol out of his jacket and calmly points it directly at the back of his eloquent tour guide's head. Luganov briefly considers whether decency demands that he thank Rudolf Keller for the tour he has taken so far. But then he listens to an inner voice and decides not to make things unnecessarily difficult for his sympathetic victim.

Rudolf Keller no longer hears the shot as he falls forward, happy and dead. Only a few birds in the treetops of the dense floodplain forest witness this dastardly deed and fly away excitedly, screaming in protest.

## **Coming home**

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Gianna and David are picked up from their hotel in Piazza De Ferrari and taken to the airport. When Claudio Gatti sees them in the hotel lobby, he almost doesn't recognize them. His guests had spent the whole day in the shopping streets around the hotel, buying what the cash card could carry. David's wish list was completed relatively quickly. His stated goal was to replace the items he had lost in Rome with new ones. Two pairs of pants, four shirts, a jacket and some socks and underpants. He hadn't lost much more than that, and there was a well-stocked closet waiting for him at home anyway. For Gianna, however, this shopping trip was another completely new experience. She would never have imagined such a variety of stores and goods. The two of them had begun their shopping trip by acquiring a large rolling suitcase and a small city backpack, and then steadily worked toward filling these two containers. Gianna took the opportunity to prepare for her new life in Vienna and bought as if in a frenzy: T-shirts, sweaters, jackets, dresses, pants, underwear, lingerie, socks, stockings and shoes. It quickly became clear that another rolling suitcase was needed and then it went on blithely until the cash card signaled at some point that the limit had been reached. They used the remaining credit to buy a delicious ice cream in a sidewalk café before returning tired to their hotel and preparing



for departure. Claudio Gatti is astonished when the chauffeur heaves two voluminous rolling suitcases into the trunk of the limousine.

At the airport, Gatti hands them their provisional travel documents. He accompanies them to the check-in counter and then says goodbye before they go through security:

*»Good bye, my dears, and take better care of yourself in the future!«*

*»Thank you very much for everything you and your colleagues have done for us!« David replies kindly and gives the cash card back to Gatti.*

*»How much money is left on it?« Gatti asks curiously.*

*»No idea! We only bought the most necessary things,« David fibs and then whispers softly to him: »I'm sure there's still enough for a visit to Casa Vienna!«*

With a meaningful grin, Gatti lets the cash card disappear into his wallet and hurriedly leaves the departure area of the airport, while Gianna and David join the queue for the scanner procedure. Gianna is amazed when she sees the contents of her new backpack in full detail on the security officer's screen. And when she herself is scanned in the body scanner and sees the result on the screen next to the checker, she would like to sink into the ground with shame.

*»This modern world really scares me!« she says to David as they drink a cocktail in the VIP lounge.*

*»Why?«*

*»Have you seen how they can literally strip you with their equipment?«*

*»You mean the full-body scanner at the security checkpoint! In the past, that only existed at airports. But now you can't even get into a museum without someone checking what you're wearing under your clothes.«*

*»That's perverted! Speaking of perverted - do you think that this Gatti really goes to the brothel with our money card?«*

*»Sure!« grins David. »I can vividly imagine him trying to have a good time at the expense of the city of Genoa right now!«*

*»I want to see his face when the money ends up not even being enough for a condom!«*

Gianna and David shake with laughter as they imagine the bitter disappointment that awaits this would-be Casanova right now.

After the second cocktail, their flight is called for boarding. While they stand in line, David gives Gianna a brief crash course in flying. She has never flown before and therefore doesn't know much about such obvious things as boarding passes, hand luggage and seat belt signs. She also doesn't really understand the purpose of the life jacket under her seat, given the planned flight route. But once she has taken her seat in the comfortable leather chair in business class and is following the events around her with interest, she can hardly wait for the flight to finally get underway.

As soon as the plane is in the air, Gianna presses her nose against the window pane. The captain has taken off in a westerly direction and first flies a wide left turn over the Ligurian Sea before flying over Genoa once more and then making his way over the Apennines.

*»How tiny it all looks from up here! Look David, down there you can see the harbor and the old town!«*

David is amused by the childlike enthusiasm with which Gianna experiences the first flight of her life. But when the border fence, gleaming red in the evening sun, becomes visible below them, even he cannot escape this fascinating sight.

*»Somewhere down there we went by train!« Gianna sighs. »It seems like a lifetime ago to me. Yet it's only been a week since then.«*

The jet climbs higher and higher, and when they reach the Po Valley, a dense cloud cover prevents any downward visibility. In the meantime, however, the flight attendants are already pushing their carts with food and drinks down the aisle.

*»Why don't they serve the food on the airport?« Gianna asks uncomprehendingly. »With this cramped space and the rocking, it's no fun!«*

*»You should experience that in the back of economy class!« David laughs. »You won't have as much space as you have here in Business Class on your future flights anytime soon! Eating and drinking is just part of flying. By the way, I recommend you try the tomato juice. Down on the ground, no normal person would drink such a thing. But they say it has a very special taste up here in the air.«*

It takes less than two hours for the plane to touch down at Vienna Airport in Schwechat. As soon as they enter the airport building, Gianna and David are met by an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He guides them past the normal immigration control and accompanies them to the baggage carousels, where they wait together for the arrival of their two new suitcases. Customs hardly takes any notice of them, so that just a quarter of an hour after landing they are back in a black luxury limousine and speeding toward the city center.

David remembers that his car must still be in the airport parking garage. When he flew to Rome, he left it there with the intention of picking it up again after three days. Now two months have passed and his car is probably still there. »Oh dear, that's going to be expensive!« David thinks to himself and hopes that he won't have to pay the accrued parking fees himself in the end. Normally, he would have added the parking ticket to his travel expense report and gotten reimbursed by Thomas Prenninger. But how and with whom should he ever account for this trip? Slowly, he begins to suspect the bureaucratic difficulties he will face in the near future.

The chauffeur heads for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Minoritenplatz and lets his passengers out in the underground parking garage. While the luggage remains in the limousine, Gianna and David are led to the third floor of a large administrative building. The long corridors seem a little spooky in view of the advanced time of day. It is already long after office hours and most employees have long since left the ministry. In one of the many offices, however, the light is still on, and when Gianna and David are led in by their companion, they immediately recognize Dr. Braunweger's surprised face behind the desk.

*»Ah, Mr. Jonas and the enchanting lady from Rome! Please sit down! I hope you had a good flight.«*

*»Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary of State,« David replies.  
»The Genoese authorities have left us wanting for nothing in the last two days. However, they also had a lot to make up for!«*

*»I can understand your anger. As I understand your description, both of you have had to go through a lot in recent weeks. I'm sure you understand that my colleagues and I want to talk to you in depth about what happened in Rome. In view of the late hour, however, I don't want to bother you with it any more this evening. I'm sure you're dead tired and want to get home as soon as possible.«*

*»Do I even have a home anymore?« David asks cautiously. »After all, I was declared dead several weeks ago!«*

*»I can reassure you on that point! Actually, your apartment should have been dissolved long ago. However, the process dragged on unexpectedly. First, the forensics department had to release the apartment, then your parents wanted to get some personal belongings out of the apartment, and finally, the de-cluttering companies have been so busy lately that the eviction of your apartment was not scheduled until next week. Well, fortunately, we have now been able to cancel that appointment. Here is your key!«*

David happily accepts the key. That would have been missing now that one would have dissolved his dwelling. His furniture and other belongings would probably have gone up in smoke in the Vienna incinerator. Where would he have lived and what would he have had to buy?

*»How do I get valid papers again now? At the moment, my girlfriend and I only have the provisional travel documents they gave us in Genoa.«*

*»I have a temporary ID card for you here. The final ID card in credit card format has already been applied for and will be ready in about two months. You will be informed by your local residents' registration office when it is ready. You will have to reapply for a passport yourself, if necessary. As far as your fiancée is concerned: Ms. Marconi, you must contact the Foreigners' Registration Office immediately so that your residence status can be clarified. For the time being, you have your travel documents from Genoa. Be aware, however, that these are not official documents here in Vienna. If you get into a control before the Aliens Department has issued you a toleration certificate, you will have a problem! I therefore strongly advise you, preferably tomorrow already, to go to the Aliens' Registration Office and apply for a temporary residence permit.«*

*»How are we going to get money again?« David asks with a worried expression. »Surely my account at the bank has been closed by now!«*

*»You'll have to check with your account-holding institution directly. Declaring someone dead is not a simple process. But bringing someone back to life is certainly even more complicated! I am not aware of a comparable case that has ever happened before. You can be prepared for some bureaucratic hurdles! But there is something else that comes to my mind: Your car was impounded at the airport and towed away. In the meantime, it was picked up by your father and transferred to his place of residence. As far as I know, your parents live in the Bavarian Forest. You will certainly pay them a personal visit in the next few days. Then you can clarify the matter with the car directly with your father.«*

It's a load off David's mind when he hears that he won't have to pay a lot of money to unload his car at the airport. A visit to his parents is at the top of his to-do list for the next few days anyway, and for the time being he can manage without a car. That's what it's been like for the last few weeks.

*»But we were just talking about money. We have a fund for hardship cases like yours. We will give you a temporary money card that you can use to cover your current expenses. Don't expect too much from it now, though. The amount available to you is relatively small. In addition, if I am correct, you will also have to provide for your fiancée, as she has no income of her own. I mention this because just a few minutes ago I received an e-mail from the esteemed Signore Gatti, in which he complained about your wasteful use of his cash card. He writes, without going into further details, that you have put him in a very embarrassing situation!«*

Dr. Braunweger cannot understand why Gianna and David suddenly laugh out loud when they hear about Signore Gatti's complaint e-mail. He continues in his usual matter-of-fact manner:

*»But that doesn't matter now. You should just be aware that you can't make any big leaps with the money from the fund. If you have no other questions, I don't want to keep you both any longer today. My colleagues will contact you in the coming days anyway. Until then, I would like to urge you once again not to talk to anyone - and especially not to the press - about this diplomatically relevant matter!«*

With these admonishing words, the Secretary of State says goodbye to his guests and wishes them a good night. The official who picked them up from the airport accompanies Gianna and David back to the underground garage, where the chauffeur is already waiting for them. After a half-hour drive through brightly lit Vienna, they reach David's apartment and after another half-hour, Gianna and David fall into bed, dead tired.

## Sole perpetrator

Jan and Kevin both shake their heads in disbelief. Once again, they read the coverage of the mysterious attack:

*Donaueschingen: There is still a lot of guesswork about yesterday's bomb attacks on the Danube tunnel near Fridingen and the sinkholes near Immendingen. The body of the man found at the detonation crater in Immendingen has now been identified. It is the thirty-year-old geology student Rudolf K. from Donaueschingen. The police assume that he is responsible for both explosions. At present, it is still completely unclear whether he died accidentally when the bomb was detonated or whether the act was an extended suicide. Rudolf K. is said to have had contacts with the extreme right-wing scene for some time. However, the investigating authorities currently assume that he was the sole perpetrator. The police have not yet received a letter of confession.*

Jan angrily closes his notebook and grumbles:

*»Those newspaper people! What crap they're writing again! They have no idea at all!«*

*»Are you guys in the State Department on this case?« Kevin asks in astonishment.*

*»Yeah right! All hell is breaking loose in our house right now because of this bombing action!«*

*»Why, actually? Donaueschingen is more a case for the Ministry of the Interior!«*

*»Now don't you start these jurisdictional discussions too!«*

The dispute about the domain affiliation of the upper Danube had always caused trouble and annoyance in the past years. Due to the underground water drainage of the Danube, there had been efforts from the beginning to place all villages upstream of Fridingen in the Rhine domain. Dozens of expert opinions were prepared and there were citizen protests and referendums non-stop. The supporters of the Danube and the Rhine were

always more or less in balance. For years, domain boundaries were renegotiated and maps updated. A few years ago, peace finally returned to the region. The region upstream from Fridingen was officially added to the Rhine domain. To avoid name conflicts, the upper reaches are now officially called the Rhenish Danube.

*»What was this nutcase thinking?« wonders Kevin. "Why blow up a riverbed and a small power plant like that?«*

*»I can tell you that!« answers Jan. »The detonation in the riverbed destroyed the sinkholes in the karst soil and prevents the Danube from seeping. And the attack on the power plant was actually aimed at the entrance to the tunnel, which is now also destroyed for the time being. The Danube water now has to take the detour via the Fridingen loop again and thus seeps increasingly in the direction of the Rhine.«*

*»How stupid is that? He plugs up one of the holes just so that the Danube will seep away again a few kilometers downstream? And for that he risks his life and blows himself up in the end? What did this idiot expect from this?«*

*»He won't be able to tell you anymore! In any case, the dispute about the domain boundaries will now boil up again. And this does not only concern the few quarrelsome people between the Black Forest and the Swabian Alb! Today we already received an official letter from Vienna. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs there wants to commission a geological expertise to assess the hydrological impact of the attack.«*

*»Do you think the Danube Domain is behind the attack?« Kevin asks, horrified.*

*»No shit! The relationship between our domains is very good. The Viennese certainly have nothing to do with it. However, I don't believe in this lone perpetrator theory either. We have already received a first autopsy report and the pathologist supposedly found signs that this Rudolf Keller was already dead when he was blown to pieces by the bomb. Very much is not left of him, but the*



*medical experts apparently have their methods to be able to determine something like that.«*

*»You mean he was murdered before the attack and his body is meant to throw investigators off the scent?«*

*»Possible! On the other hand, the man is said to have been a geologist and to have been very familiar with the sinking places in the riverbed of the Danube. The blasting of the swallow holes was apparently facilitated by boreholes in the subsoil, which this Rudolf Keller itself had helped to create during his studies. These boreholes were filled with a high explosive and blown up. As it looks at the moment, all underground drainage channels at the Brühl sinkhole have been destroyed by the force of the explosion.«*

*»So it was an inside job after all! Maybe the pathologist is wrong and the man did it after all. Do you know more about his contacts with the far-right scene yet?«*

*»What the newspaper is writing is exaggerated beyond measure. During his studies, this Keller went along to some demonstrations and accidentally ended up in the wrong database. According to our findings, there is nothing to it at all!«*

*»Who would have an interest in such an act? A militant citizens' initiative, perhaps? Who wants to force a domain change this way?«*

*»This could explain perhaps one of the attacks, but not both! The effects of the destructions cancel themselves out so to speak! One sinkhole is closed, but the other one is opened! That does not make sense! There must be something else behind it. Besides, these attacks don't cause anything in the long run! The power plant and the tunnel will surely be repaired quickly. And the water in Immendingen will surely find its way through the rock again sometime. And if it doesn't, they'll just drill an artificial drainage hole to restore the original condition.«*

*»You mean the watershed hasn't shifted at all with this?« Kevin asks uncertainly.*

*»The watersheds have nothing to do with this at all! Such water losses due to underground runoff are actually completely irrelevant for the course of the watersheds. Such a thing is called an irregularity. In nature, such a thing is quite rare, but if you look at artificial waterways, it is basically nothing else. The Rhine-Main-Danube Canal also connects the river systems of the Rhine and the Danube and still has no influence on the course of the watershed. Water is simply taken from one system and supplied to another.«*

*»But then why did this back-and-forth on the upper reaches of the Danube occur at all?«*

*»Quite simply, it's the human factor! The people on the upper Danube feel more connected to their neighbors in the Black Forest than to the Balkan peoples on the Black Sea. That is why they want to belong to the Rhine domain. If you then have the right expert opinions drawn up and generate enough public pressure, with a bit of luck you will eventually reach your goal. Constant dripping wears away the stone - and this is true in this region in the truest sense of the word.«*

*»So you have no idea who might be behind the attack either,«  
Kevin sighs.*

Jan thoughtfully rocks his head back and forth and thinks. Finally he says:

*»No. I have no idea who the masterminds of such an action might be. But my gut feeling tells me that there is much more at stake here than an insignificant border dispute on the upper Danube. I believe that someone is trying to instrumentalize people here. And that is to make mood against the whole domain system. I would be surprised if this was the last attack!«*

## **Red tape**

The Vienna Foreigners' Registration Office has just opened its doors as Gianna and David draw their waiting number and wait patiently for their turn.

*»So, from the Tiber domain!« The unfriendly official grumbles when she has had the facts explained to her. »Then please fill out these forms and bring them back to me!«*

*»Sorry, you must have misunderstood us!« David replies, visibly irritated. »This is only about my girlfriend! I've been a citizen of the Danube domain since birth!«*

*»You, Mr. Jonas, are only supposed to sign this declaration of commitment for me! I also need proof of income and assets from you!«*

*»What do you want me to commit to?«*

*»With your signature you confirm to pay for all costs incurred by the Danube domain due to the stay of your guest. This could be, for example, hospital costs that are not covered by the insurance of your acquaintance. Whereby it is probably to be feared that there is no such thing as a health insurance in the Tiber domain! Another example would be accommodation costs that could result from Mrs. Marconi deciding to seek political asylum here. In this case, we would also feel compelled to recover the costs incurred from you.«*

*»Don't sign that!« Gianna interjects. »They're trying to rip you off!«*

*»What if I don't give this letter of commitment?« David wants to know.*

*»Mr. Jonas, I understand your concerns,« the case worker replies smugly. »But if you don't vouch for your girlfriend, she will be served with a deportation order today and taken out of the domain. Our migration laws are completely unambiguous and leave me no room for maneuver. However, I can only advise you to think twice about this guarantee! The costs that you could incur are considerable! We recently had the case where someone vouched for his fiancée. Unfortunately, the lady left him shortly afterwards and went into hiding. The good man had to pay all search, prison and deportation costs of his ex and was*

*economically ruined in the end. So think twice before signing this!«*

*»These are blackmail methods!« David grumbles. »When was this decided and passed by the legislature?«*

*»Young man, I have been working in this authority for almost forty years now and I can assure you that these regulations in the Residence Act have never changed during my entire period of service. It has always been that way!«*

*»Give it to me!« David grumbles. »I'll sign it.«*

*»Whatever you say! Next, your girlfriend would have to go up one floor to the public health officer. She will get her RFID<sup>42</sup> chip injected there and also her biometric data will be collected.«*

*»What am I being injected with?« Gianna asks uncertainly.*

*»It's no big deal,« the lady behind the desk tries to reassure Gianna. »They'll implant a tiny glass bead under your skin between your thumb and index finger. It's just a quick prick and doesn't hurt very much.«*

*»You're treated like a chipped dog!« scolds David, shaking his head uncomprehendingly. »But you can rest assured. The procedure really doesn't hurt and the bead doesn't bother much either. I have something like that, too. You can feel it here!«*

David extends his right hand to Gianna and lets her feel the small foreign object in the fold of skin.

*»Why did you have that done?« Gianna asks in amazement.*

*»I can use it to identify myself on my computers without a password. It's also been quite useful on some of my project assignments. Facilities management can then store the various access codes for the locking systems on the chip in your body, so you don't have to carry around your company ID card all the time.«*

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42 RFID: Radio-Frequency Identification - Technology for contactless identification of objects and living beings with radio waves.

Gianna didn't understand a word they were saying, but she finally complied with the authorities' wishes. At the public health officer's office, she is not only given the chip, but also has her fingerprints scanned, a saliva sample taken, and her face and the back of her eyes photographed. When she finally survives the procedure and returns to the office of the employee at the immigration office, the RFID scanner on the door handle immediately recognizes the freshly implanted chip. Gianna has not yet opened the door completely when she hears a beep and her name and likeness appear on the large screen on the wall.

*»There you go!« the officer exclaims happily. »After all, we want to know who we're dealing with!«*

On this day, however, there are still more official business to be done: In the afternoon, David is summoned to the Foreign Ministry by Dr. Braunweger. Once again, he has to tell his story from beginning to end. The gentlemen present become very perceptive when David tells them about the transfers from the Vatican Bank that went to various European domains and always had the strange word "watercleanup" in the subject line. But when asked if he had any proof of his observations, David could only shake his head. He considers whether he should mention the stolen data from Klaus Baumann. But then he would certainly be asked how he got hold of this secret bank data and why he didn't inform the authorities about it right away. What consequences could this have for him? He would probably be charged with data theft. And if his employers got wind of the fact that he had misappropriated secret project data, he would be out of business forever. In view of his future professional existence, David decides to let Klaus Baumann's data rest in the depths of his hard drive.

Without any evidence, however, his stay at the Foreign Ministry ends as expected: David is ordered to keep quiet about the matter and to refrain from making any statements that could in any way discredit the Vatican or the Vatican Bank. He is then told that there are no open questions at the moment, but that he should be ready for further questioning.

At home in his apartment, he frustratedly tells Gianna about his visit to the ministry.

*»What if I just anonymously publish the remittance slips that my colleague illegally found in the database?«*

*»Don't do that!« Gianna warns him. »I made that mistake once and you can see how it got me! You'll be the first one they'll suspect of being the author!«*

David is undecided what to do. On the one hand, these dubious money transfers have already caused him enough problems. On the other hand, the hunting fever has awakened in him again. He knows something that others don't know and it doesn't give him any peace. Who are these people who have done to him all that he had to go through in the past weeks. Who are they? The murderers of Klaus Baumann, Thomas Prenninger and Gianna's friend Salvatore! All evening David racks his brain to think of what he could do to get on the trail of these criminals. Over dinner, he has a spontaneous idea that slowly matures into a plan. And late at night, when Gianna is already in bed and asleep, David sits down at his computer and begins to put his plan into action.

He thinks about the days in Livorno, about Lorenzo Bocelli and everything he taught him there about the Darknet. David installs the necessary software on his computer to be able to surf the Darknet undetected. He finds what he is looking for on a marketplace for illegal electronic devices. Fortunately, he also remembers Lorenzo's customer number and password. After he completes the purchase process, he receives a confirmation that the delivery is expected to arrive at the specified packing station in downtown Vienna in three days. »Thanks Lorenzo, thanks Alessandro,« David thinks to himself and grins. »Your escape organization simply still owed me this travel price reduction!«

## **Watercleanup**

One morning at breakfast, Jan asks his friend Kevin:

*»Do you guys in the police have any new information about the Danube bomber yet?«*

*»Is this an official request or private curiosity?«*

*»Do I really need to talk to your supervisor first? Jan jokes.*

*»Actually, yes,« Kevin laughs, takes a sip of coffee and begins to tell: »We have a hot lead: A week before the attack, an Igor Popov from the Neva domain arrived at Zurich airport. He took a rental car there and was on the road with it for a week. The morning after the bombings he returned the car to the airport and flew back to St. Petersburg. It is not known what he did during this week. But he drove his rental car too fast into a speed trap near Donaueschingen one day before the attacks.«*

*»That doesn't sound very suspicious yet, if you ask me,« Jan says.*

*»I'm not done yet! This Igor Popov was in a bank in Zurich and withdrew a lot of money in cash. In the meantime it has turned out that there is no Igor Popov at all. So the man was traveling with a false identity and even maintains a bank account in this false name!«*

*»That will be some tax evader hiding his millions from the taxman!«*

*»Nonsense. The account was created only recently. There have only been a few transfers to it so far, and since Zurich belongs to the Rhine domain, the city is no longer a tax haven! We suspect that the man has something to do with the attack. A witness has come forward who is sure that he saw Rudolf Keller in the company of another man at the Fridingen power station the day before the attack. We showed him the speed camera photo from Donaueschingen. Unfortunately, it is a bit blurred. The witness said that the person on the photo could well be the unknown companion of Rudolf Keller. However, he would not swear to it. Nevertheless, we suspect that Mr. Keller and Mr. Popov scouted the two crime scenes together the day before the attack!«*

»What about the rental car? Was that seen at the power plant as well?«

»No, the two men were traveling in Rudolf Keller's old Peugeot. This car was found near the site of the attack in Immendingen.«

»So Rudolf Keller could have driven it to the scene of the crime, where he then died,« Jan speculates.

»Or Popov murdered Keller before the attack and then drove his body with the Peugeot to the place of the bombing. The forensic team has also already found evidence in the vehicle that speaks for this thesis!«

»What do you guys from cybercrime actually have to do with this case?« Jan wonders.

»We were called in because of the account in Zurich. We are to find out if there are other account movements in international payments that are similar to the pattern of payments received in Popov's account.«

»How are you going to do that? You can't check and evaluate every single transfer!« Jan laughs.

»Let us worry about that!« Kevin grins. »As IT criminologists, we already have our methods! Anyway, there have been three transfers to Popov's account in the past. All three came from the Istituto per le Opere di Religione, better known as the Vatican Bank. And all three contained as the purpose of the transfer the word 'Watercleanup'.«

»Watercleanup - what's that supposed to be?« Jan wonders.

»I don't know that either. But we have found quite a few such transfers in the meantime. And some of them are bound to be of interest to your State Department!«

»In what way?« Jan asks, astonished.



*»Some of these money transfers went, for example, to a militant group in Maastricht that has been fighting for a long time for a detachment of the Meuse domain from the Rhine domain.«*

*»This old story!« Jan groans and pours himself another cup of coffee.*

The dispute over the Meuse river system is now almost as old as the Rhine domain. The cause of this conflict lies in the natural conditions of the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta, the common estuary of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt rivers into the North Sea. The river arms in this delta have always been subject to strong changes due to the violence of storm surges. At present, according to the official reading, the Meuse flows into the Rhine many kilometers before reaching the North Sea and thus belongs to the Rhine domain. However, this was not always the case. For a long time, the Meuse was considered an independent stream and not a tributary of the Rhine. The separatists in the Meuse domain therefore vehemently demand a special autonomous status for their river system and would prefer to completely detach themselves from the hated German-speaking main domain. In the domain capital Cologne, this is of course observed with great concern. After all, the Meuse is not only the most important tributary of the Rhine. The Meuse domain is of great economic importance, and it also includes indispensable German-speaking regions, such as the old imperial city of Aachen.

*»Are you saying that this ominous donor is supporting the Meuse separatists' autonomy efforts with its payments?« asks Jan.*

*»That's what it looks like! And this is not the only case where the stability of a domain system becomes the target of extremists. In recent years, there have been a number of minor bomb attacks on cross-domain power and water lines. Although the damage was always limited and quickly repaired, it was always accompanied by a great deal of inconvenience for the citizens affected. The new boundaries always led to lengthy discussions about responsibilities and the assumption of costs. The most serious attack took place recently in Genoa. You probably remember the*

*attack on the oil pipeline. By the way, there is a very interesting parallel to our current attack on the Danube: We were able to prove that here, too, the Vatican Bank made corresponding transfers to an account at a Genovese bank. And here, too, the money was withdrawn a few days before the attack by a man whose identity turned out to be false in retrospect!«*

*»That's incredible!« Jan marvels and shoves the rest of his toast into his mouth. »I really need to discuss this with my colleagues. Can you please email me an official report with your current findings to the ministry today? If you ask me, you guys are on the trail of a conspiracy that is directed against the stability of the established domain systems!«*

Kevin isn't much for conspiracy theories. In this case, however, he agrees with his life partner. Something bigger is going on here. And it's high time to take a closer look at the Vatican Bank's role in this dubious game.

## **Phone home**

David also has a lot to do on the second day after his arrival in Vienna. Gianna accompanies him most of the time. In the apartment, the ceiling would fall on her head. In addition, doing so she gets to know the foreign city and the modern living conditions a little.

David spends almost the entire morning at his account-holding bank. He tries to reactivate his frozen accounts, which is anything but easy.

In the afternoon, his way leads him to the central bank and his work colleagues. Most of them have already heard about his unexpected return from beyond the grave and are delighted to welcome him back into their midst. But when he talks to the new project manager, he is told in no uncertain terms that his place on the team has been taken elsewhere and that there is currently no need for him to continue working on the project. His teammates had already indicated that Thomas Prenninger's successor is a real asshole. In a direct conversation with him, David comes to the same conclusion and in the end he is glad not to have to deal with this arrogant guy any longer.

Back at his computer at home, David modifies his status to "Available" in his preferred job portal and sends a short email to his intermediary, asking him to be on the lookout for a new project for him. Then he calls:

*»Gianna, will you please come and sit with me on the sofa? We really need to talk to my parents on the phone today!«*

Gianna looks at him with wide eyes and doesn't quite know what's coming now, especially since there's no phone to be seen on the table for miles around.

*»Alexandra, please call my parents!« David speaks loudly and clearly in the direction of the large flat screen on the opposite wall.*

A very sexy looking female avatar suddenly appears on the monitor<sup>43</sup> and asks:

*»Hi David, what would you like me to tell your parents?«*

*»I'm sorry Alexandra, I didn't make myself clear! Please establish a video phone connection to my parents!«*

*»Alright David! I'm going to make a video phone connection to Mom and Dad Jonas!«*

Gianna is astonished. David apparently keeps a computer slave who is always at his service. She would love to know what else the lady on the screen can do. For the time being, however, a turning hourglass appears on the screen and a telephone ring tone sounds. After it has rung five times, a picture appears on the monitor that Gianna immediately recognizes. She already knows David's parents' living room from the video conference in Genoa.

*»Hi Mom!« David calls. »We arrived in Vienna safely and wanted to get in touch with you!«*

*»David! Finally! I've been trying to call you a couple of times. Dad and I have been worried about you!«*

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<sup>43</sup> Avatar: Animated computer character capable of interaction in a virtual environment.

*»Sorry Mom! But Gianna and I were constantly on the road yesterday and today. Unfortunately, I don't have a cell phone at the moment either. I lost it in Rome. Of course I saw your calls on the answering machine. I'm really sorry that I'm only getting in touch with you now. What do you think about Gianna and I coming to visit you tomorrow?«*

*»Oh yes!« his mother exclaims enthusiastically. »I finally want to be able to hold you again! This video thing is all well and good. But your visit would make me much happier. Hello Gianna! How are you?«*

*»Hello Mrs. Jonas! Thank you, I'm fine. I'm also looking forward to meeting you in person tomorrow!«*

*»Where's Dad?« David asks his mother. »How's his heart?«*

*»He's fine, too. He's just going for a walk and will probably be home soon. How did you get here? You know that your car is here with us? Your father picked it up in Vienna when they said - well you know.«*

*»We'll come by train. If it's all right with you, we'll then take my car back to Vienna in the evening.«*

*»Well, sure! We didn't drive it anyway. I think your father can hardly cope with this modern car anyway. I'm glad as hell that he brought it all the way to us unscathed!«*

The phone call continues for over an hour. David's father also appears on the screen and immediately addresses a few reproachful words to his son for not getting in touch sooner. Afterwards, however, he strikes a conciliatory tone and observes the new daughter-in-law-to-be with interest. Gianna and David explain several times during the conversation that the engagement story in Genoa was just a white lie, but they have the impression that the parents don't want to hear that and are really eagerly awaiting the meeting with Gianna.

*»Tell me David,« Gianna asks after Alexandra disconnects, »is it possible to use this miracle machine to call Naples?«*

*»Hmm, I don't know if she can do that!« he answers and shrugs his shoulders. »Would depend on a try! Alexandra, connect me to Naples, please!«*

*»Hello David, do you mean Nepal?«*

*»No, Naples in Italy, you stupid nut!«*

*»Sorry David, I don't know of any domain called Italy. Do you mean the domainless city of Naples at the volcano of Vesuvius?«*

*»Yes, that's the one I mean!«*

*»I'm afraid I can't find a subscriber database in the domainless city of Naples at the volcano Vesuvius. Should I try to connect to the switching center?«*

*»Yes please!«*

*»All right David! I will try to establish a voice connection with the switching center of the domainless city of Naples at the volcano Vesuvius.«*

The tension increases when a very noisy toot can be heard from the loudspeaker. Suddenly, a loud woman's voice screams:

*»Pronto!«*

Gianna is irritated for a moment and then calls out in Italian:

*»This is Gianna Marconi from Vienna. Could you please connect me to Signora Gina Falcone? Falcone in Via Concordia!«*

For a while there is silence at the other end of the line. Then the lady from the office answers:

*»Emanuele and Gina Falcone, Via Concordia 36, one moment, I connect!«*

Gianna and David look at each other with wide eyes. The screen on the wall now shows the symbol of an ancient dial telephone. Then it begins to

toot from the loudspeaker. Once - twice - three times - four times - five times - six times, until a soft voice answers:

*»Falcone?«*

*»Aunt Gina, is that you? This is Gianna! Are my parents with you?«*

*»Gianna!« it screams shrilly from the other end of the line. »My God, Gianna! How are you? Just a minute, I'll get your mother on the line!«*

Again, a few endless seconds pass. Then Gianna hears a familiar voice:

*»Gianna? Is that true? Is that you?«*

*»Yes Mom, it's me. I'm fine! I'm in Vienna and I'm safe! Is Daddy with you too?«*

*»Oh my God! How nice it is to finally hear your voice again. How we have been worried about you! Yes, Daddy is here in Naples, too. We are doing well. Daddy has even found a job! He guides German-speaking tourists through the ancient sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii. There are quite a few tourists here in Naples! Much more than in Rome! But tell me, how did you end up in Vienna? Did you cross the border so easily?«*

*»Mamma, this is a long story. I have experienced many exciting things in the last few weeks, but now I am safe for the time being! I'm staying here in Vienna with a friend and will probably stay here until further notice. Too bad you can't see him! His name is David and he's sitting next to me on the sofa right now, while I'm talking to you on the phone with some kind of miracle box. But now tell me, Mamma! Is there anything new from Rome? Have you heard anything from Marco and Maria? Do you think I can come back home soon?«*

*»First give my regards to this David unknown! I'm so glad you found someone to take care of you! But yes, since you ask me so: There is news! Dad picked up the newspaper from the newsstand*

*this morning and it said that yesterday in Rome two Vatican employees - «*

Gianna's mother has not yet finished her sentence when a penetrating »Tuut - tuut - tuut« sounds from the loudspeaker and a contrite-looking Alexandra appears on the monitor:

*»I'm sorry, David! I'm afraid the connection was interrupted. Shall I try to re-establish the connection to the switching center of the domainless city of Naples at the volcano Vesuvius?«*

*»Yes please!« David calls out to his electronic assistant.*

However, all attempts to get through to the exchange in Naples once again fail miserably. Either all available lines are busy or some other technical problem is preventing the connection from being established. Finally, Gianna says:

*»Let it go! We've already shared the most important things. I can't tell you how happy I am to have finally given my parents a sign of life. I'm sure they've both been scared to death for me these past few weeks!«*

*»I have the impression that your parents have settled in Naples quite well! And I think it's great that your father is now working as a tourist guide!«*

*»I think he also enjoys it more than his translation work in Rome. My father loves contact with other people. Who knows, maybe they will stay in Naples forever!«*

At this thought, Gianna is overcome by a pang of homesickness. When will she see her parents again? And what should she do when they actually never return to their hometown? Despite all the adversities, Gianna still feels like a Roman. And now she sits here in faraway Vienna, not knowing what the future holds. She bashfully wipes a small tear from her eye and snuggles up to David.

*»Thank you so much! Thank you for all you have done for me!«*

David takes Gianna tightly in his arms and answers:

*»Don't talk such nonsense! Without you, I wouldn't have gotten out of Rome alive. I can never make up for what you did for me! Don't worry about it!«*

*»If you say so!« sobs Gianna, trying to change the subject. »What else can that wonder box on the wall actually do?«*

*»You mean Alexandra, my digital assistant?«*

The pronounced name immediately brought the avatar back from standby to the monitor.

*»Hello David, what can I do for you?«*

*»Hello Alexandra,« Gianna calls out. »What do you usually do for David?«*

*»I don't understand the guest user's question!«*

*»Well you seem like a pretty hot chick! What services do you offer?«*

*»David, do you want me to answer the guest user's question?«*

*»Yes please!« replies David, visibly amused.*

*»I'm Alexandra, David's virtual assistant. I research data, answer questions, and manage media. What can I serve with?«*

*»Can you do naughty things too?« asks Gianna cheekily.*

*»I consider this question as inappropriate!«*

*»Can you play videos for us?«*

*»Yes, of course! Which video do you want me to play?«*

*»Play an erotic movie for us!«*



*»I consider this request to be inappropriate! The requested video category is not included in the participant's booked service package. Which video do you want me to play?«*

*Gianna laughs and says to David, »Can you please put that stupid bullshit box back down?«*

*»I'm sorry,« he replies, »Alexandra is always listening in, always waiting to get a request. You can't turn her off!«*

Gianna rolls her eyes and looks offended in the direction of the voice computer, which has meanwhile gone back to stand-by. Then she slowly starts unbuttoning David's shirt and whispers:

*»We could just go over to the bedroom. She can't see or hear us over there.«*

David grins and just nods silently. The two get up from the sofa, go next door and pull the door shut behind them. They have been secretly longing for this moment for weeks. Now that the tension of the adventurous journey has fallen away from them and their relationship has been blessed, so to speak, by the ancestors, human nature mercilessly takes its toll. All dams break. There is no stopping them. For the rest of the evening and half the night, the two simply have indescribably good, horny sex.

## **Massacre**

Jan Eckert sits in his office in the Foreign Ministry and looks out of the window, lost in thought. From his desk, he can look directly down on the Rhine, where two heavy push boats are currently struggling upstream at a snail's pace. Suddenly, his computer goes "pling" and an e-mail from Kevin brings him back to reality:

*Hello Jan,*

*have just found the following message in a roman daily newspaper:*

*<http://www.lacitta.tiber/news.cgi?id=08154711>*

*Attached is the translated wording, in case the server should be down again.*

*Kevin*

*--*

*Rome:*

*Yesterday, when the chambermaid Alina T. wanted to clean a Roman brothel, she made a terrible discovery in two rooms: In both rooms she found a male corpse, completely undressed and tied to the bed with hands and feet. The initial investigation revealed that both men's throats had been cut. Commissario Rosetti, of Rome's Criminal Investigation Department, stated that he had never encountered such a horrific sight in his entire career. Whether it was a crime or a tragic accident in the course of a bondage session has not been determined at the moment. According to the investigation, the dead are high-ranking employees of the Vatican: Monsignor S., the head of the Vatican Bank, and Alberto B., his private secretary. Only a few days ago, accusations against both men in the context of an international money laundering scandal had become known. Whether the crime is related to these still unconfirmed accusations can only be conjectured at this time. The Pope has asked God for mercy for the lost souls and asks all the faithful in Rome to do the same.*

Jan remembers that Kevin's police department wanted to investigate the mysterious payments from the Vatican, marked "watercleanup". Obviously, they stirred up a hornet's nest! He skims the newspaper report once again. As he does so, he is involuntarily shocked. He opens his Internet browser and goes to the homepage of the Vatican Bank. Under the heading "Governance," an old, familiar face beams at him. Monsignor Domenico Scarelli - the head of the Vatican Bank.

»My God, Domenico!« thinks Jan. »What has become of you? This time you've really gone over the top!«

## **Dangerous game**

Over the past few days, Gianna and David have visited all of Vienna's sights. Gianna's favorite so far has been the Spanish Riding School, where

they attended the morning training of the young Lipizzaner stallions in the magnificent riding hall of the Hofburg and then took part in a guided tour of the stables. What magnificent animals! What a difference from the miserable nags Gianna knows from her homeland, which are harnessed to carts in the streets of Rome or have to pull the plow across the fields at the gates of the city. Pathetic, pitiful creatures they all are, compared to these proud warm-blooded horses, which master the high school of dressage with playful ease. Gianna was so fascinated by the perfect interaction between horse and rider that she seriously considered taking some trial riding lessons at a horse farm.

But then she remembered that she should perhaps first focus on her professional advancement before taking up an expensive hobby. Her stated goal is to be able to work as a freelance journalist and blogger in her new home as well. At the moment she is dependent on David's generous support. But for all her love, she is deeply reluctant to become dependent on a man and has vowed to stand on her own two feet soon. She is therefore looking for a way to have her Roman journalism training recognized in Vienna. This morning she has an informational interview at a certification institute and has already left the house early in the morning.

David is still looking for a new IT project. Yesterday he had a job interview at a telecommunications company. But the project manager turned out to be an old-school Scrum <sup>44</sup>Master who still wanted his team to use the dusty, so-called agile methods of decades long past. David immediately lost all interest in the job and withdrew his application under a pretext. As long as he doesn't find anything better, he just enjoys his free time.

Today he takes advantage of Gianna's absence to check at the packing station whether his order from the Darknet has already arrived. And sure enough, the dubious electronics shipper from the distant Asian domain has delivered as promised. Excited, like a little boy at Christmas, David carries the heavy package home and opens it on his desk.

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44 Scrum: Process model from project management

*»Golly,« he thinks to himself. »This is bigger than I thought!«*

In addition to the actual hardware, the package also contains a CD with the associated software. David slides the disc into the drive of his notebook computer and starts the installation. While the progress bar slowly grows, David takes out his "special cell phone for emergencies" from the desk drawer. He had found this old thing while jogging once years ago and took it home with him. It's a completely outdated model, with a cracked display and chipped paint. The former owner must have been a strange guy: The cell phone was not secured by any PIN. And the SIM card's prepaid contract has not been canceled to this day. Whenever David wants to make an anonymous call, which he has admittedly only done once so far, and then only for fun, all he has to do is load a little credit onto someone else's prepaid account and off he goes. However, for the clever plan he has concocted, this cell phone is just made for the job! After a first test with the ordered electronic device is successful, David thinks to himself:

*»Now it was worth it that I didn't throw the thing into the electronic waste. I'll show you all that you can't fool David Jonas with impunity!«*

Then he opens the folder on his computer with the bank transfer data that had been Klaus Baumann's undoing. He doesn't have to search long, then he finds the cell phone number that Klaus called back then to make his demands. David starts typing a text message:

Know about watercleanup the and Vatican  
Bank. Am today at 11 pm in the darknet  
chatroom:

<http://z1x8w3xq7vpfqwbo.onion/>

He checks that everything has been written correctly, then presses the send button and switches off the cell phone shortly afterwards. The message is on its way.

For the rest of the day, David is barely able to think clearly. Again and again he is tormented by doubts as to whether he is really doing the right

thing. When Gianna comes home, he only listens with half an ear as she recounts her experiences. Gianna quickly realizes that there is not much to do with David today and goes to bed early. At eleven o'clock David, alias Mallory1, sits in front of the computer screen with wet hands and watches the activities of his chat room with anticipation:

```
> - User Saul8 has entered the chat -  
> [Saul8] Hello?  
> [Mallory1] Thank you for coming!  
> [Saul8] Who are you, what do you want?  
> [Mallory1] My name doesn't matter. I know  
all about the financial transactions of the  
Vatican Bank! About everything that has to  
do with the watercleanup action! Simply  
everything!  
> [Saul8] Again!!!! What do want want?  
> [Mallory1] 100.000 Danube thaler in cash.  
> [Saul8] LOL  
> [Mallory1] You will stop laughing soon! If  
you do not fulfill my demand, I will hand  
over all documents to the authorities! I  
expect you coming Saturday at 22 PM in the  
city Zwiesel in the Bavarian forest. Call  
the cell phone number from which the SMS was  
sent. You will receive further instructions  
on the phone. If you do not call, you will  
regret it!  
> - User Mallory1 has left the chat -
```

David shuts down the computer and takes a deep breath. His message has reached the intended recipient. His schedule is perfect. Next weekend, he and Gianna will visit his parents in Viechtach. He will take a short break from family life there and get done what needs to be done now. It is not far from Viechtach to Zwiesel. Both small towns are located in the domain SchwarzerRegen.Regen.Danube. And from both towns it is not far to the Silberberg. The mountain from which you can already see the watershed to the Elbe domain. The mountain with the old silver mine, whose widely ramified cave system has fascinated David since he was a child. As a

teenager, he once spent an entire vacation week there with the Viechtach Boy Scouts. Together with three friends, he secretly sneaked out of the tent camp at night and explored the dilapidated tunnels of the old mine with a shovel and headlamp. It had been creepy and adventurous. Not for people with weak nerves or claustrophobia. When he thinks back on it today, he can only shake his head at so much youthful recklessness. Is he acting recklessly again now?

*»No!« he encourages himself. »This time I have everything under control!«*

## **Munich**

Jan is just about to leave his apartment when the phone rings.

*»Hi Mom! You're lucky you caught me yet. I was already standing in the doorway.«*

*»Hi boy! I just wanted to hear your voice again and thought I'd give you a call. At my age, you never know when it's going to be the last time!«*

*»Mom, you're going to live to be a hundred! I'm not worried about that at all!«*

*»Yes, yes, you just make fun of me. Mr. Maier from our street also thought that he could enjoy his pension for a long time. Yesterday his wife found him in the bathroom! Just like that, he fell over and was dead. Isn't that terrible?«*

*»Oh, Mom, there comes a time for everyone when the clock runs out.«*

*»Where were you going just now, my boy?«*

*»I have to travel to Munich on business. It came up at quite short notice.«*

*»Today on Friday? With the weekend just around the corner? What's so urgent in Munich that you can't wait until Monday to do it?«*

*»Mom, you know I can't tell you about my official business. That comes under the heading of secrecy. And my job entails irregular working hours. When there's an emergency, it's hard to be considerate individual employees' weekend plans at the State Department.«*

*»Yes, yes, and then you're on the road again for days and I don't know how to reach you! Wouldn't be the first time!«*

*»I promise I'll get in touch with you. But now I really have to go, otherwise I'll miss my flight to Munich. Please say hello to Anna and Lena from me and take care of yourself.«*

*»I will, my dear boy. And promise me you'll take good care of yourself, too! I'm worried about you after all!«*

*»Bye Mom!«*

*»Bye Jan!«*

## **Silver Mountain**

Boris Luganov is pissed off. Until now, his cooperation with the organization was characterized by professionalism and mutual respect. Now, all of a sudden, there is nothing but hectic and pure actionism. If this continues, he will have to seriously consider whether further cooperation with this bunch of chaotic people is still advisable.

He had left Vienna early in the morning. It had taken him four hours in his rental car to finally reach this godforsaken nest in the Bavarian province. All day long he had scouted the immediate vicinity of Zwiesel to get a picture of the situation. He had had to improvise the bomb case in a hurry. And the whole thing only because some half-strength amateur was playing the blackmailer again.

*»What are these idiots from the organization actually thinking? Do they want to bomb everyone who gets wind of their bumbling money deals in the future? First this moron from the Vienna sewers and now a hillbilly!«*

At least they can cook well here in the province! Boris Luganov has just had a sumptuous dinner in an inn with good Bohemian cuisine. In addition, he had three half-liters of beer from a local brewery and, to top it off, three glasses of a strange stuff that the locals call Bärwurz. A normal citizen would not be allowed to get behind the wheel now. But Boris Luganov is not a normal citizen, and the only policeman who once carelessly asked him for his vehicle documents at night has long since been buried.

Good food or not. Luganov's mood is at rock bottom when he reaches for his cell phone at ten o'clock, activates the caller ID suppression and calls the agreed phone number.

*»Hello?«*

*»Yes, hello here too! I am now in Zwiesel as agreed. Where will we meet?«*

*»Do you have the money with you?«*

*»Yes of course!«*

*»Do you have a navigation system with you?«*

*»What else should I have with me? Yes, I have a sat nav in my car!«*

*»Listen! Enter "Bodenmais silver mine" into your navigation system.«*

*»Wait a minute!«*

Boris Luganov puts his smartphone in the center console and starts typing the desired destination into the navigation system.

*»Fifteen minutes. Can that get there?«*

*»Yes that's correct. Stubbornly follow the sat nav instructions. The last stretch leads steeply through the forest and is actually closed to public traffic. Just drive up and ignore the closure sign! The road ends directly at the entrance of the silver mine. At this*



*time of day, however, there is not a soul up there. Call me again as soon as you get there! Do you understand everything?»*

*»Yes,« Luganov grumbles. »I'll get back to you in fifteen minutes.«*

Visibly annoyed, he ends the conversation and starts the engine. While he steers his 5-series DKW over the lonely country roads of the Bavarian Forest, the events of the past weeks run through his head like a movie:

They had sent him to Rome again! And there, too, he had to play the fireman for the organization - and save what could still be saved.

Monsignor Scarelli had proven to be incompetent and was about to blow the cover of the organization's plans. He had allowed an important witness, who had been on to him, to leave unhindered for Vienna, where he was now willingly divulging his knowledge to the authorities! "SM" and his secretary had to be rendered harmless before they could do any more damage. And of course, the dirty work once again fell to him! Well, not the real dirty work, but at least the planning and the strategic preliminary work. A common violent criminal named Bruno had been placed at his side as an assistant. Originally, the two priests were to be lured to a conspiratorial meeting in the Castel Sant'Angelo and blown up there with a tremendous bang. This was also the reason why he had been entrusted with eliminating them in the first place. But then the high lords from the organization suddenly decided otherwise and demanded a more bloodthirsty variant. Or maybe they just realized that it would be irresponsible to unnecessarily damage such a unique building as Castel Sant'Angelo. While Bruno used his contacts in the red-light milieu to set up the brothel, it was his job to find two members of the Swiss Guard who were willing to take part in the murder plot. He didn't have to look far before he met the right men in the Vatican State motor pool. One evening, as Scarelli and Bonelli were about to be chauffeured to a Roman restaurant, the time had come. Shortly after the black shuttle left the Vatican, the priests were overpowered by the guardsmen and taken directly to the brothel, where Bruno the Butcher finished the job. He himself would

never have been capable of such an act. He of all people, who has countless men and women on his conscience, can't stand the sight of blood! But it is like it is. Everyone must see that he makes the best of his talents. And his talent, fortunately, is not in brutal slaughter, but in effective eradication through the forces of physics and chemistry. He's good at building bombs, and that's why he's here now, where the fox and the hare say good night to each other.

Talk about the devil! In the last few meters before the finish line, he sees a fox lacing along beside the narrow roadway. In the light of the headlights, its eyes sparkle devilishly. »What does a human being want up here at this time of night?« the fox seems to think and trudges away.

*»I'm at the destination now!« Luganov grumbles into his cell phone as he parks his car near the silver mine.*

*»Good! Now go to the wide driveway leading away from the visitors' restaurant. There are a couple of trail signs there.«*

*»Do you have any idea how dark it is up here?«*

*»Don't make such a fuss! Today is a full moon and if you need more light, use the lamp in your smartphone!«*

*»In case you missed it: My smartphone is at my ear so I can hear what you have to say to me! Besides, you can't light up and talk on the phone at the same time with this stupid thing!«*

Boris Luganov has a good mind to break off the action and go home again. Now this moron also sends him over hill and dale through the dark forest. He takes his Bluetooth headset out of his jacket pocket and attaches it to his ear. This way he at least has one hand free again. He lets his smartphone slide into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls the pistol out of the shoulder holster instead. In the end, that lunatic is still waiting for him up here! With the bomb case in his left hand and the pistol in his right, he slowly stalks forward. Finally, he sees the signs illuminated by the bright moonlight:

*»I'm at the signposts now. Now what?«*

*»Very good! One of the signs points the way to the top of the Silver Mountain!«*

*»Am I supposed to go on a mountain tour at night in the dark now? Listen, kid! If you want to fuck with me, say it right now!«*

*»No, no, take it easy! You only have to go a little way along this path. Follow the path until you come to a stone pyramid. If it starts to get steep, you've walked past it!«*

Reluctantly, Boris Luganov follows further telephone instructions. He hates hiking, just as he hates walking in general. Walking is for poor people who can't afford a car! Boris Luganov also used to have to walk a lot, but actually he thought that those poor times were finally a thing of the past. After what feels like an eternity, he discovers the stone pyramid.

*»I'm at this pyramid now! Now what?«*

*»Follow the little trail that branches off to the right here. You're almost at your destination!«*

*»I hope so! The path is getting worse and worse!«*

Boris Luganov fights his way through a wild tangle of bushes and shrubs. After a few meters, however, the condition of the trail improves and he makes faster progress again. Behind a left turn, however, the narrow path ends finally and abruptly.

*»It can't go any further here! I'm standing right in front of a rock!«*

*»You should actually be standing in front of the door at the Wolfgang tunnel now!«*

Luganov puts down the bomb case and carefully scans the supposed rock in front of him in the dark.

*»You're right - this is wood, not rock!«*

*»Find the door handle and try to pull the door open to the outside!«*

*»You don't really want me to go in there now!«*

*»Now go ahead! Try if the door opens!«*

Luganov looks for the door handle. When he finds it, he pulls on it and notices that the door opens with a groaning squeak.

*»Yes, the door opens!«*

*»Very good! Now listen to me carefully! You put the money case in the tunnel right behind the door. Then you go back to your car the same way you came and drive home. Do you understand?«*

*»Do you think I'm stupid? Of course I understood that! Is that the end of our game of hide and seek?«*

*»I think so!«*

*»Well then, good night!«*

Luganov takes his smartphone out of his jacket and ends the connection. Then he turns on the flashlight app and opens the door to the narrow tunnel. The flashlight shines into a low passageway that leads directly into the mountain. Just beyond the door, he should put the suitcase down. »Bad - very bad!« Luganov thinks to himself as he assesses the effect of the bomb standing right by the door. In the light of the lamp, he goes a few meters further into the tunnel, which becomes narrower and narrower the further he goes.

*»Here it should work! This way, the pressure wave is better distributed inside the mountain and doesn't fizzle out.«*

Luganov puts down the bomb case and starts to retreat. While closing the door to the tunnel, he looks at his wristwatch. Quickly he walks the way back to the car. He is annoyed that he had not had more time to design the detonator. Such a sophisticated mechanism, as in the Vienna bomb, would have been ideal. But due to the tight schedule of his clients, there was only

enough time for a simple radio trigger. He gives the blackmailer fifteen minutes before he blows him up together with his supposed money suitcase. Of course, there is no guarantee that the man will actually try to take the suitcase within this time. But Boris Luganov knows his clients. He can hear the sheer greed in their voices every time. He would swear that this backwoodsman is lurking somewhere in the mountain, eagerly waiting to take the suitcase with the money. He'll think he's particularly clever - and won't get a chance to regret his mistake.

When Boris Luganov reaches his car, ten minutes have passed. Far and wide there is not a soul to be seen. Slowly he drives down the sloping road into the valley. Just before he turns onto the main road at the foot of the Silver Mountain, he looks at his watch once more. In a moment, the fifteen minutes will be over.

*»Let's get this over with!«*

Boris Luganov takes the transmitter with the radio trigger in his hand and arms it. As always at this moment, he gets goose bumps. He loves this moment when his thumb presses this little button and just a fraction of a second later the gate to hell opens. For him, this is the high art of killing. True to his motto:

*Rapidus - Subitus - Tinnitus*

Death should occur quickly, unexpectedly and above all deafeningly loud! Without blood and as painlessly as possible for all involved. With a smile on his lips and reconciled with the world, Boris Luganov presses the button.

And the effect of the new type of explosive is really incredible! Compared to this detonation, Luganov's previous bombings were just tired New Year's Eve firecrackers. The shock wave rips through the entire mine and all the tunnels of the widely ramified former silver mine. The double peak of the Silver Mountain, the so-called Bishop's Cap, collapses and henceforth looks more like a German spiked helmet. Individual rock

fragments fly as far as to the neighboring village of Bodenmais and damage cars and house roofs. Only by chance are there no casualties in the village.

## **Miscarriage of Justice**

At the same time in Vienna:

Landolf Prohaska has been sitting in the remand prison in Vienna's eighth district for two days and still has no clue why. Only that it has something to do with his cell phone, which he lost two years ago while walking through the Danube park.

Since when is it illegal to lose your cell phone? They had picked him up at the construction site like a criminal and arrested him. In front of his boss and all his colleagues. How could he ever face them again? Even if this mistake was cleared up. Something always sticks to you!

Why should he have reported the old cell phone as lost or stolen? He had already bought this new smartphone, with the cool apps and the super-cheap contract. He hadn't shed a tear for the old scrap!

The police had claimed that he had contacts with the mafia and they had convicted him on the basis of his SIM card. They interrogated him for hours. They asked him if he had a lawyer. Of course he didn't have a lawyer. What for? He has never been guilty of anything. Well, maybe the thing with the fight five years ago, but hey, what the fuck? How long are they gonna keep harping on that old thing?

All his friends and acquaintances have been questioned by the police in the meantime. His girlfriend told him that yesterday when she was allowed to visit him in custody. They have been questioned whether he had connections to Islamist circles! Or whether he would belong to a terrorist organization! They asked all kinds of crap!

His gaming computer has also been confiscated. And they turned the whole flat upside down. What were they looking for? The few drugs they

found were for personal use. How can it be that they are allowed to rummage around in the belongings of blameless citizens?

And all neighbors have also been questioned. Whether he had had any recent visits from suspicious-looking people. What is a suspicious person anyway? His buddy Kurti maybe, with his beard and long hair? For his girlfriend, he looks like a criminal - at least that's what she always says when she's drunk.

The public defender they got him now said he should refuse to testify. But why the hell? He hasn't done anything wrong! He shouldn't worry, the defender said. In a few days they'll have to prove him guilty or let him out again. Unless he is classified as a dangerous person - then things would look bleak for him because of the new law, he said.

Landolf Prohaska clenches his hand into a fist and hits the hard mattress as hard as he can. If he ever gets his hands on that pig who got him into this mess! He'll make mincemeat out of him!

## **License to kill**

David and Gianna had gone to David's parents on Friday evening to spend the weekend together. Today, Saturday, they used for an excursion in the surrounding area. Near the small town of Bayerisch Eisenstein, they hiked along the watershed between the Danube and Elbe domains. This was once the site of the Iron Curtain many decades ago, which Gianna's father often told her about. Looking at today's green border, however, nothing reminds them of the horrors of that time.

Afterwards, David drove to the silver mine. He suggested that they take part in a guided tour of the mine, but Gianna vehemently resisted because of her claustrophobia. Instead, they then climbed to the summit and enjoyed the magnificent distant view at 955 meters above sea level. During the ascent, David disappeared once briefly behind the bushes. But not to follow a human need, as Gianna thought, but to place the IMSI catcher<sup>45</sup> that he had been carrying around in his backpack all day.

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45 IMSI catcher: Electronic device for capturing the International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) of a cell phone.

In the evening, they drove back to Viechtach, where David's mother was already waiting for them cooking. After dinner, David excused himself and disappeared into the guest room to put his long-cherished plan into action.

Now Gianna sits alone with David's parents in the living room and has a great conversation with them.

*»You know Gianna, when you talk about your hometown of Rome like that, it always makes me think back to my childhood in Aleppo.«*

*»Mother, please don't start talking about the war again!« David's father intervenes. »By the way, where is our wayward son? I haven't seen him for an hour!«*

*»I don't know!« Gianna answers and shrugs her shoulders. »In the past few days, he's also just been sitting in front of his computer all the time or busy with some electronics tinkering.«*

*»Oh yes, that's how he is, our dear boy!« sighs Mrs. Jonas. »I'm afraid, my dear Gianna, you'll have to get used to that! When he gets his teeth into something, he's in another world. I think he's sitting next door in what used to be his nursery, tinkering with something.«*

Next door, David's pulse skyrockets when his cell phone rings at ten o'clock. The moment David reads the words "Call from Anonymous" on the battered display, he inwardly rejoices. Everything is going according to plan! Shortly after, when the caller arrives at silver mine and scowls at David's instructions, everything goes like clockwork. While David directs the unknown man by phone to the remote entrance of the Wolfgang tunnel, he watches the screen of his notebook. All of a sudden, the redeeming message appears:

*»Mobile subscriber successfully detected!«*

It worked! The IMSI catcher that David hid in a bush near the tunnel has made contact with the stranger's cell phone and captured all of his data.

*»Now it was worth buying the expensive device after all!« David triumphs*



as he watches the red dot on the screen slowly move across the map displayed. From now on, he can follow this cell phone and determine his current location at any time. At least when it is switched on and connected to a network. As the red dot approaches the road to Bodenmais, however, it disappears and a message appears on the screen:

*»Connection to tracked subscriber lost!«*

»He's probably switched off his cell phone, David thinks and continues to watch the map on the screen for a while. He zooms out a little so that he gets an overview of the entire Bavarian Forest region. When he sees the city of Regensburg, he remembers that he wanted to inform the bomb disposal unit as a precaution. Since it cannot be ruled out that there is no money in the deposited suitcase, but a bomb, it should be defused by the responsible authorities before someone is harmed by it. David looks up the emergency number of the explosive ordnance disposal service on the Internet and types it into his anonymous cell phone. But he is astonished to discover that the line is permanently busy. »Who's making permanent calls there at this time of night?« he wonders, irritated, and tries a few more times. After the tenth attempt, however, he gives up and sends an anonymous e-mail instead:

*There may be a bomb in the Wolfgang tunnel of the Silberberg (Bodenmais). Please take a look and defuse it before it causes any damage!*

*A concerned citizen*

Then he looks at the computer map again as if spellbound. But there is no red dot to be seen. David would love to know where the person he is talking to is right now. Judging by his accent, it was an Eastern European - Polish, Russian, something like that. His voice sounded threatening and cold. It's certainly best not to tangle with him!

David closes his notebook and is about to rejoin Gianna and his parents in the living room when a deafening bang shatters the silence of the night. The explosion must have occurred in his parent's dwelling! David hears

Gianna and his mother screaming loudly next door. What on earth has happened? Now someone starts yelling around as well. It's a male voice and it's definitely not his father's voice.

*»Where is he?« the voice shouts. »I know he's here!«*

David's blood froze in his veins. How could this man find him? His plan was perfect! Had he made a mistake? While David is still thinking about what he could have done wrong, his body is pouring out huge amounts of adrenaline. His mind orders him to check on Gianna and his parents. His body, however, is already in panic mode and orders him to do something completely different: escape - let's get out of here as long as he hasn't been discovered! Gianna and his parents have nothing to fear - it's all about him.

David tears open the balcony door of the guest room and runs out. Thank God his parents live on the ground floor! With a great leap, he swings over the balcony railing and lands two meters below in the soft lawn. »Stop, freeze!« someone yells behind him. His pursuer is already in the guest room and has seen him. As fast as he can, David scrambles to his feet and sprints away. He takes the low hedge at the end of the green with a high jump from a fast run.

*»Freeze or I'll shoot!« shouts his pursuer.*

Shortly afterwards, a shot rings out. »Bloody hell,« David curses as he runs along the dimly lit street by his parents' council estate. Behind him, he can already hear the footsteps of his pursuer on the pavement. He is hot on his heels, and if David is not mistaken, he is even slowly getting closer.

*»Stop right there, I said!« it screams from behind and another deafening shot explodes.*

At full speed, David briefly turns around to the rear and sees a large man just a few meters behind him. David leaves the street and turns into the small park. Maybe he can escape there somehow under the cover of darkness. David's heart is beating up to his throat. His lungs threaten to burst at any moment. He runs as fast as he can. Back there in the park, he

had always smoked secretly with his buddies when he was a teenager. If he had done sports instead! Then he wouldn't cut such a miserable figure now.

David thinks he can already feel the breath of his pursuer on his neck. One last time he tries to mobilize energies and to accelerate a bit - but it is too late! Suddenly he feels a clutching grip on his legs and falls headlong to the ground. A split second later, he feels the weight of his pursuer on his back. Because his face is pressed into the damp grass, he can't even cry out as the man forcibly twists his arm backwards.

*»Gotcha!« shouts a mocking voice, while David feels the cold steel of a firearm in his neck.*

He feels as if his entire life is passing by in fast motion once again at this moment. Over - over - over! He has screwed it up! Poor Gianna - what is to become of her now? Come on! What is this guy waiting for?

But instead of the redeeming shot, only another hellish pain awaits him when the man on his back also twists his other arm backwards. What is this? Does this pig want to torture him now and force him to reveal his knowledge?

But nothing of the sort happens. Instead, David feels a pair of handcuffs clicking on his wrists.

*»Get up, boy!« the man rules him unkindly. »We still have a long way to go!«*

He pulls David up roughly and for a short moment David can look him in the face. His counterpart looks very athletic and no longer quite young. David estimates him to be at least fifty years old and secretly admires him for his fitness. The man is apparently in a hurry. He turns David rudely in the desired direction and pushes him in front of him. David feverishly considers whether he might be able to escape somehow. But with his arms fixed behind his back, he can't think of escaping again. Like a piece of cattle, David is driven out of the park onto the street and from there back towards his parents' apartment. Almost all the windows in the social

housing estate are now brightly lit and a pair of curious eyes peers out from behind many a curtain. The whole neighborhood has been awakened by the noise, the shouting and the gunshots and now wants to know what is going on out there. Hope slowly germinates in David that his pursuer is not the man from the silver mine after all. His suspicions become certain when he sees the huge police contingent in front of his parents' house.

*»Come on, this way!« the man behind him commands, pushing him toward a van parked on the other side of the street.*

The sliding door is open and David can see two men sitting in the brightly lit interior of the mobile operations center. With a rough push, David is transported inside the vehicle. He opens his eyes in disbelief. He knows one of the men! It takes a brief moment before he can correctly place the familiar face of the secretary of state in this unfamiliar environment:

*»Dr. Braunweger!« exclaims David in disbelief. »What the hell is going on here?«*

*»Well, well, Mr. Jonas!« replies the man from the Vienna Foreign Ministry. »When I heard the place name Viechtach, I already suspected that you had your fingers in the pie again in this matter!«*

*»Are you suggesting that this is a police operation?«*

*»Did you think we would storm your parents' house with the flying squad our own amusement?«*

*»Then these two men are colleagues of yours?«*

*»In a way - the gentleman on my right is an agent of the Danube Secret Service.«*

*»Agent?« David repeats incredulously. »Secret agent or what? And who is this old muscle man who almost killed me? Is he a member of your spy agency, too?«*

*»No,« replies Dr. Braunweger. »The colleague comes from the Rhine domain and supports us in our investigations in a matter in*

*which you have now already disturbed us sensitively for the second time!«*

*»That maniac was just about to shoot me! Didn't you hear the shots he fired at me? And what's an agent from the Rhine domain doing here? Doesn't this guy have a name? Is that James Bond?«*

*David's pursuer starts grinning all over his face. Then he casually pulls his Walther PPK pistol out of his shoulder holster, demonstratively holds it under David's nose and says:*

*»If I had wanted to shoot you, you would be dead now. Dead as a doornail! My name is Eckert. Jan Eckert.«*

## Part 3

### Bitterness

Prof. em. Dr. Dr. h. c. mult. Karl Guggenmoser sits in a wheelchair on the veranda of his chalet and asks his nurse to pour him another glass of red wine.

*»Professor, don't you remember what the doctor said? Alcohol and fatty foods are absolutely taboo for you!«*

*»Ludmilla, I'm not paying you to give me medical advice! I would like to have a glass of this delicious wine now! After that, you may take me to bed for my sake.«*

*»As the professor wish!«*

Guggenmoser has been emeritus<sup>46</sup> for ten years. Now and then he still gives guest lecture. But since his health has been failing, he has increasingly retreated to his refuge on the southern edge of the Alps. These dry, warm summer nights are among the few things that still give him pleasure. But only a few more weeks. Then the days will become shorter again and the inevitable winter will take hold in the Alps. The long, cold, terrible winter! If he will still live to see the next spring?

If only he had moved further south! His parents once had a house in Tuscany and spent many happy days there. Oh, how long ago that may have been! But even if Tuscany is still a place blessed by the sun and nature: In 2052, it is about as suitable as the Sahel or the Gobi Desert for an old, well-to-do retiree in need of care.

What has the domain system made of this world? His domain system! What would Europe and the world look like today if he hadn't been so blinded by his own ideas back then? Would the old states have picked themselves up again and would everything have been different and better? Is he partly to blame for the course of history? Will subsequent generations

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<sup>46</sup> Emeritus status: retirement of a university professor

blame him one day? Was Karl Marx to blame for the crimes of the communists and Stalinists? Why was his lengthy book about the "Capital" read? Who had read it at all? Certainly not the workers and peasants! And yet it went viral, even though the term didn't even exist at the time.

Karl Guggenmoser sips from his glass and lets his eyes, clouded by cataracts, wander into the distance. All the way to the end of the valley, where he blurrily recognizes the lights of the nearby village. It is a small place. About six hundred people live there. Actually, he would like to do without the presence of people altogether. But he depends on the grocery store, the doctor and the well-kept restaurant in the village square. And his young nurse has also made it clear to him that she has to be around people from time to time; good pay or not.

Yesterday, he received an invitation to give a guest lecture at a prestigious London university. The audience would not be students, of course, but prominent representatives of high finance and business. Filthy rich people to whom the unique experience of seeing the forefather of the New World Order live once again would be worth an exorbitant donation. His speaking fees had risen immeasurably in recent years. It almost seems as if they were trying to keep up with the number of his memory lapses and speech lapses. Should he really go through the hassle of traveling again and play the domain clown in front of an assembled audience? And lecture on the merits and successes of a system in which he himself has long since ceased to believe?

*»Ludmilla, please roll me back inside! I think I need to go to the bathroom again. And after that you can get me ready for bed!«*

Karl Guggenmoser swiftly empties his red wine glass, drooling over himself from top to bottom without noticing. Meanwhile, the nurse shakes her head pitifully.

## Scavenger hunt

Meanwhile Jan Eckert can look back on a remarkable career in the foreign intelligence service of the Rhine domain. After many interesting years in the economic department, at some point he had doubts whether he really wanted to do this dry desk job until retirement. Initially, he had tried to compensate for his frustration by working extra hours, but as a result he had only slipped deeper into the crisis. When his doctor diagnosed him with classic burnout symptoms, he made the radical switch from the back office to the fighting force.

After moving to the top floor of the State Department, however, less changed at first than he had thought. His new colleagues quickly cured him of the usual agent clichés. Thanks to his excellent physical fitness, however, he soon had a reputation as a "tough guy." And when he literally made the veteran swashbucklers look old in shooting training, he had arrived in the inner circle of the Rhineland's top agents. His first missions, however, were less spectacular than he had imagined.

Jan's life partner Kevin watched the transformation from desk jockey to foreign agent with fascination. In the past, it was Kevin who could sometimes come up with exciting experiences and anecdotes from his work environment thanks to his job with the Internet police. Over time, however, the IT cops only seemed like innocent orphans when Jan returned from one of his foreign assignments and shared his adventures. From then on, Kevin and he also formed a good professional team, exchanging their latest findings through official channels with the approval of their superiors.

*»My dear Dr. Braunweger,« says Jan in the mobile command center, »now don't tell me that you already know this Mr. Jonas and that this mission here was all for nothing!«*

*»It certainly wasn't free! When I think of the costs for requesting the special operation forces: the good Mr. Jonas will have to nibble on that for a while!«*



*»Why me?« asks David indignantly. »Nobody told you to come here and play the wild man!«*

*»Oh no? Do you know how long we've been monitoring this phone number?«*

*»What phone number do you mean?« David asks gruffly.*

*»Well, the number where you sent your stupid text message: "I know about watercleanup and Vatican Bank!" You remember?«*

*»Are you saying that you intercepted all my communications with the criminal organization?«*

*»Unfortunately, no!« sighs the secretary of state. »Access to your chat on the Darknet unfortunately eluded us. The only usable lead was your stolen cell phone, which we were able to locate here tonight!«*

*»What do you mean with stolen cell phone? I found this thing once years ago. The owner doesn't seem to have missed it, otherwise he probably would have reported it lost long ago and blocked his account!«*

*»You can ask Mr. Prohaska for his opinion yourself. The way I see him, he will break every bone in your body if he ever gets his hands on you. The man has been through hell the past few days, you can believe me!«*

David shrugs his shoulders and replies meekly:

*»It's his own fault, the idiot! I couldn't have known that this would have such consequences.«*

*»Do you even know who you've been messing with?« Jan intervenes in the conversation. »I don't mean this redneck who owns the cell phone, but the organization we're after!«*

*»I know that they have my friend Klaus Baumann on their conscience and that they have been trying to kill my girlfriend and me in Rome! Isn't that enough that I finally want to know who I'm dealing with here?«*

*»Don't you think that's a bit too big for an amateur?« asks Dr. Braunweger, shaking his head uncomprehendingly. »Do you even have an idea what you've done to the Silver Mountain today?«*

*»I didn't do anything wrong,« David replies uncomprehendingly. »I even tried to inform the bomb disposal unit in Regensburg that there might be a bomb up there. But apparently no one there is interested. They'd rather have private, ongoing conversations than take such reports. I tried calling repeatedly, but the line was busy all the time.«*

*»You really don't have the slightest idea what's going on in Bodenmais at the Silver Mountain right now! Shall I read you a few messages that have reached us in the past few hours?«*

The Secretary of State takes a stack of papers from the shelf and begins to read aloud:

*»Come quickly! There was a violent volcanic eruption at Silver Mountain!«*

*»Help! My new car was bombed by aliens! There are projectile fragments all over my yard!«*

*»Turn the light back on! Our beautiful landmark, the illuminated summit cross on the Silver Mountain no longer shines! You can also exaggerate with power savings!«*

*»Oh my God! The whole summit is gone! Where are the tourists supposed to go to now?«*

Angrily, Dr. Braunweger slams the stack of papers back into the shelf.

*»Do you want to hear more? What do you think going on at the explosive ordnance disposal services of the Danube domain right now? We've never had an attack like this before! Even in the neighboring Elbe domain, they have sounded the alarm as a precaution because they don't know what triggered this huge detonation! We can talk of luck that according to current knowledge no people have come to harm!«*

*»What can I do about these criminals overreacting like this?« David tries to talk his way out of it. »All I wanted to do was catch and track one of these criminals with my IMSI catcher. If you hadn't intervened now, I would have presented him on a silver platter and all you would have had to do was arrest him!«*

*»How naive can you be?« the secretary of state scolds. »Where did you get an IMSI catcher anyway? You do know that it is strictly forbidden to operate these things in our domain? Why didn't you contact us right away? After all, we are familiar with such technical things! How do you think we were able to locate you so quickly here with your parents in Viechtach? By the way, did you have any success at all with your cops and robbers game?«*

*»Yes, of course!« David replies, beaming with joy. »I've tracked the guy and his cell phone! Thanks to my tracking software, I can now locate him anywhere in the world at any time! That is - of course, only when he has his cell phone turned on.«*

*»So where is he now?«*

*»Well,« David prints sheepishly. »I was able to follow him live as he drove from the mine down to the road to Bodenmais. After that, unfortunately, there was radio silence.«*

*»That can't be true!« You destroyed primeval Bavarian nature and irreplaceable cultural assets up there for nothing! If you had contacted us right away, we would have reached the same result much faster and in a more environmentally friendly way!«*

While the secretary of state holds his hands in front of his face, shaking his head in despair, the two agents cast meaningful glances at each other. Finally, it is Jan who asks David incredulously:

*»Did you just say that with your software you are able to track this person live all over the world? I mean everywhere - not just in the Danube or Rhine domains?«*

## Relationship conflict

In the Bavarian Forest, peace does not return so quickly. Once again, David has to tell his story in detail; this time he is grilled by the two secret agents. Meanwhile, in the house, State Secretary Dr. Braunweger questions Gianna and David's parents. He wants to know whether one of the three could be a confidant or even an accomplice. However, everything points to the young man having deceived not only the Viennese authorities, but also his own family. After two hours of intensive interrogation, he apologizes to Mr. and Mrs. Jonas for the inconvenience caused and returns to the vehicle of the mobile operations center. It is not until dawn that Dr. Braunweger and the two agents declare David's interrogation over and hand him over to the care of his family. Shortly thereafter, the last police vehicles leave the housing estate.

The mood in the Jonas home is frosty. Only David's mother briefly takes her son in her arms before saying, with tears in her eyes:

*»How could you do this to us? You put us all in mortal danger with your recklessness! That you are not ashamed of yourself!«*

David's father does not look at his son. With boards and nails, he tries to make a makeshift repair to the apartment door that has been blown open by the action forces, so that at least the neighbors no longer have free access. If Gianna's looks could kill, David's last hour would have struck long ago. Wordlessly, she disappears into the guest room and goes to bed. When David joins her a little later and lies down next to her on the narrow mattress, she hisses venomously at him:

*»Just leave me alone! I don't want anything more to do with you!«*

*»What's wrong with all of you? Do you think I did all this for fun?«*

*»You have shamelessly betrayed me and abused my trust!« she scolds and turns her back on him.*

*»That's not true! I just didn't want to worry you unnecessarily and drag you into this!«*

*»Oh really? And when would milord have let the stupid chicken at his side in on his plans?«*

*»I was going to tell you everything, but then things just took on a momentum of their own.«*

*»Momentum, that I do not laugh! You decided everything on your own and left me completely out of it! You even made the trip to that stupid silver mountain just to mount that stupid fucking thing there. Why did you even take me with you to your parents?«*

*»I had no idea things would get so out of hand! I thought I'd plant the transmitter and make a quick phone call in the evening. How was I supposed to know that the Secret Service was already on this and pulling off such a huge thing?«*

*»You don't know anything! That's your problem. You're only interested in yourself! You don't care at all that you hurt my feelings. But you can believe me: I won't let you do that to me! Tomorrow morning I'll be gone! Just don't think that I'll let you continue to make fun of me!«*

*»Gianna, don't make such a fuss! Where do you want to go? Why don't you sleep on it for another night and give me another chance before you make such hasty decisions?«*

David gently puts his hand on her shoulder, but she firmly rebuffs him and says:

*»Tomorrow I will try to reach my parents by phone. My mother wanted to tell me some important news from Rome before the telephone connection was cut off. Maybe I will be able to return home already. And if not, I'll find some way to manage on my own. Don't think I'm dependent on you! Now leave me alone! I want to sleep!«*

David lies awake for a long time, struggling with himself and his fate. The sun has long been shining through the cracks in the blinds when he gets up

and sets off for the city center. He buys two large bouquets of flowers in a florist's store at the train station, hoping to calm the heated tempers a little. The flowers have the desired effect on his mother. Mrs. Jonas, who had also hardly slept a wink that night, takes her son in her arms and hopes for the great family reconciliation. Jan's father, on the other hand, just turns up his nose at this unnecessary waste of money and returns to reading his Sunday newspaper. In Gianna's case, the attempt to bribe her fails completely. When she finally comes out of the guest room around noon and sees David standing in front of her with the flowers, she wordlessly snatches the bouquet out of his hand, plucks off the head of one blossom after the other and throws the remaining greenery at his feet without a word. Then she goes into the kitchen and spreads herself a sandwich, while David and his mother remain perplexed in the living room.

The atmosphere in the Jonas house matches the weather of this sultry summer Sunday in August. There is a thunderstorm in the air and it seems as if only a small cause is needed to trigger a momentous storm. Everyone feels uncomfortable and would like to see domestic peace restored. But no one is willing to make the first move. In the afternoon, the doorbell rings on the makeshift closed apartment door. When David's father checks to see who dares to disturb his Sunday peace, he immediately recognizes the man who yesterday, together with the special task force, raged so vehemently through the apartment.

*»Good afternoon, Mr. Jonas. My name is Eckert. I wanted to apologize to you personally for yesterday's action! And I would also like to speak to your son again in private. Is he at home?«*

*»David! Visitor for you!« Mr. Jonas calls indignantly into the apartment. »One of the gentlemen from the police!«*

David comes shuffling in from the living room.

*»What else is there? I've really told you everything already!«*

*»Mr. Jonas, it's about the tracking system you mentioned yesterday. Would you be so kind as to show me that sometime, please?«*

*»I don't know,« David prints around a bit. »As far as I know, I'm not obliged to incriminate myself after all. This system is - how shall I put it - not exactly legal. And I don't want you to put a rope around my neck!«*

*»Don't worry about it,« Jan answers quietly. »But might I come in first? It doesn't talk so well here in the hallway!«*

*»For my sake, come on in. We can talk in the guest room. You already know your way around the apartment!«*

Then David shouts loudly in the direction of the living room:

*»Gianna, would you also like to be present when I talk to Mr. Secret Agent?«*

Gianna comes rushing over unexpectedly. When she sees Jan standing in front of her, she remains rooted to the spot. She is sure that she has seen this face before! And that was not yesterday, when the police stormed the apartment in search of David. Sometime, many years ago or in a previous life, she has looked into those blue eyes before! But she has not the slightest idea when or where that might have been.

*»Do we know each other?« she asks uncertainly as she extends her hand to Jan in greeting.*

*»Not that I know of! Jan Eckert is my name,« Jan replies in a friendly manner. Then he turns back to David: »I'd really like to talk about this matter in private!«*

*»I don't keep secrets from my girlfriend,« David insists.*

Gianna rolls her eyes and would like to kick David in the shins. But he continues unmoved:

*»Gianna is affected by this matter just as I am. It is also in her interest that these criminals are caught and made harmless. There is nothing we can discuss that is none of her business.«*

*»Whatever,« Jan growls, »could you show me this tracking system or not?«*

David leads Jan into the guest room, sits down at his old student desk and opens his notebook. Jan and Gianna stand behind him and look over his shoulder.

*»There you see!« David exclaims, pointing to the red, slow-moving dot on the map. »Now he's turned his phone back on!«*

*»Where is that?« asks Jan, visibly electrified.*

*»Just after the San Bernadino Pass in Ticino, if I interpret it correctly.«*

*»San Bernadino? That's right behind the watershed to the Po domain! Gosh, this software is really something! Does it work by sending out silent SMS<sup>47</sup> messages?«*

*»Silent SMS?« David laughs. »How outdated is that? No, this system uses the latest exploits<sup>48</sup> in mobile networks to locate cell phones.«*

*»Don't tell me you developed this yourself! You fished it out of the depths of the darknet somewhere!«*

*»Maybe so,« David presses on. »But I already told you: I'm not willing to incriminate myself. If I get in trouble for this program, I'll erase the hard drive right now!«*

*»For heaven's sake!« Jan is startled, »Don't do that! Then yesterday's action would really have been a waste of time. Can you use this software to show the tracked cell phone's path so far?«*

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47 Silent SMS: Specially prepared short message that can be used to locate cell phones.

48 Exploit: Active exploitation of a vulnerability in a computer program.



David pulls a slider on the lower timeline to the left. As he does so, the red dot jumps jerkily back toward the north.

*»Here. This morning the cell phone was turned on in the area around Vaduz. It stayed there for a few hours and has now been moving south for two hours. But now tell me why you want to know all this! The State Secretary, Dr. Braunweger, bragged yesterday that the secret services could do it all much more professionally!«*

Now it's Jan who prints around a bit uncertainly:

*»Well, that's only partially correct. And our dear colleague Braunweger is not very familiar with the technology. Basically, he's right. Within our domains, we can monitor and locate all mobile subscribers at will. Beyond the domain boundaries, however, it becomes difficult. Not to say - very difficult! Each main domain has its own telecommunications law and is meticulous about ensuring that all data subject to telecommunications secrecy does not fall into the wrong hands. We can, of course, submit a request to our colleagues there and ask for administrative assistance. But the bureaucratic mills grind very slowly, especially in the southern domains! And for us intelligence officers, nothing is as worthless as outdated data. If you know what I mean.«*

David grins at Jan and nods his head:

*»I guess that means my amateur system is vastly superior to your oh-so-great official intelligence equipment!«*

*»Don't exaggerate, Mr. Jonas! And don't get too cocky about your illegal pirate copy! You are already acting as if you had programmed the system yourself.«*

Now even Gianna feels compelled to take David's side:

*»Don't underestimate David's skills as a software programmer! You'd be surprised to know what he can get up to in a short time!«*

David is startled and fears that Gianna might now mention the unspeakable Livorno project. He quickly takes the floor again:

*»Well, actually I work more as a freelance IT and database specialist. But now please tell me what the real reason for your visit is! Surely you didn't want to get your frustration about the inadequacies of your IT systems off your chest!«*

*»No,« Jan answers in a serious voice. »That's really not why I'm here. Rather, I wanted to ask you if you might be willing to help me in this matter. The machinations of this organization have been on my mind for quite some time and I would like to follow up on this hot lead. Would you be willing to accompany me and provide technical support in my search for this man?«*

David's mouth remains open. He is supposed to help this secret agent in his hunt for the murderers of Klaus Baumann, possibly putting his own life on the line once again.

*»Gianna what do you think?« David asks cautiously.*

*»I think you're crazy! Haven't you experienced enough in the past few months? Besides, you don't even have proper identification documents. Are you going to travel through foreign domains with your temporary ID card?«*

Jan tries to placate the upset Gianna:

*»Dear Lady! What was your name again?«*

*»Marconi! Gianna Marconi!«*

*»My dear Mrs. Marconi, there would be no problem at all with the ID card. I have a diplomatic passport and can take your friend across all domain borders without any problems. And as far as the danger situation is concerned, I can also reassure you. Your friend would only act as a technical advisor during the entire operation. As soon as access is gained, Mr. Jonas would of course be left out in the cold. Admittedly, there is never absolute security in my business. But by human standards, this deployment*

*would be nothing more than a nice coffee trip south at the expense of the Rhine domain.«*

*»Has your proposal been coordinated with Dr. Braunweger?«  
David asks curiously.*

*»Well - uh no - there you actually address a certain problem,«  
Jan stammers, scratching his head uncertainly. »This action runs  
under my responsibility, or rather under the responsibility of the  
Foreign Ministry of the Rhine Domain. I would therefore like to  
ask you to keep quiet about this matter for the time being. This  
also concerns the communication with the honored colleague  
Braunweger. We will of course keep him informed in due course.  
For the time being, however, I would refrain from causing any  
further unnecessary fuss. I think in the Danube Foreign Ministry  
some gentlemen are not very well disposed towards you anyway!«*

*»And what will happen to my girlfriend while I'm traveling with  
you? She only came from Rome a few days ago and doesn't know  
her way around here yet. I can't just leave her in Vienna! Can't  
we take her with us? Gianna speaks perfect Italian! What about  
your knowledge of Italian, Mr. Eckert?«*

Jan grimaces. The thought of involving this young woman in the matter is deeply repugnant to him. However, he doesn't speak a word of Italian and could do with a translator.

*»Would you be willing to accompany us, Mrs. Marconi?« he asks  
Gianna hesitantly.*

Gianna stares at the two men in disbelief. Then she answers:

*»By when would I have to decide?«*

*»By tomorrow morning at the latest!« Jan answers. »Time is  
pressing and we should leave tomorrow already. Is that okay with  
you?«*

David thinks for a moment. Then he says:

*»Gianna and I are going back to Vienna tonight. We would then sleep on it for a night and let you know in the morning. How can I reach you by phone?«*

*»Not at all!« Jan replies curtly. »We at the Secret Service strictly adhere to the old Hollywood principle: Don't call us! We'll call you! I'll contact you tomorrow morning at seven o'clock. I'll get your phone number. You can count on it! Is everything else clear so far?«*

*»I think so,« David replies, looking questioningly at Gianna.*

*»Well, have a good trip to Vienna and we'll talk on the phone tomorrow. Have a nice day!«*

Jan quickly leaves the apartment, leaving David and Gianna undecided. For a while they look silently into each other's eyes. Then David says:

*»Not a single word to my parents!«*

Gianna just nods briefly and replies:

*"Yeah, got it!«*

## **Nobility obliged**

Jan has returned to his hotel in Munich. Before he heads off to dinner, he has a briefing with his superior in Cologne. He opens his notebook, logs into the secure VPN of<sup>49</sup> the Foreign Ministry and starts a video conference:

*»Hello Jan, what's new on the Danube and Isar?« his boss greets him.*

*»You'd better not ask!« Jan answers and laughs. »The colleagues from Vienna have really messed up again!«*

*»In what way?«*

*»They were on the completely wrong track again! Instead of our target, they picked up a harmless witness: A young man who*

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49 VPN: Virtual Private Network

*played detective and fooled both the conspirators and the Viennese secret service. When the police arrested him, however, he stopped laughing.«*

Jan reports all the details of yesterday's raid to his supervisor, including the confidential conversation he had with David and Gianna this afternoon.

*»Tell me, what do you actually think of Vaduz?« Jan asks his boss. »Our target apparently stayed there for quite some time. He may even have spent the night there.«*

*»Vaduz? That is the former capital of this small principality on the Rhine. The current prince has been under our observation for some time. We have indications that he maintains contacts with the underworld and is involved in criminal activities.«*

*Jan says in amazement, »I thought this principality no longer existed since the crash.«*

*»You're wrong!« his boss lectures him. »That still exists. But that's a longer story. Do you want to hear it?«*

*»I ask for it!« Jan answers and grins into the camera of his notebook.*

*»The financial crash totally ruined the Princely House of Liechtenstein. All the accounts that the Liechtenstein banks managed for their wealthy clients were worthless in the end. The Princely Family fared the same as the common people: they had to start from scratch again.«*

*»But they must have owned lots of land, castles and real estate,« says Jan. »Tangible assets that came through the crisis unscathed!«*

*»But that didn't do them any good. Surely you can still remember the expropriation measures supposed to ensure the survival of the population in the Rhine domain. The wealthy nobles were the first to be expropriated for the benefit of the population. Why should they also have been better off than the rest of the world?«*

»What happened to the Liechtenstein Princely House back then?«  
Jan asks curiously.

»The princely family was quite popular among its people. Even after the annexation to the Rhine domain, the people of Vaduz remained loyal to their impoverished noble house and took touching care of their former chieftains. However, the former privileges were over. The proud, old noble house has since been dependent on a kind of basic security from their former subjects.«

»And accepted that without complaint?«

»Yes, all but one. While the rest of the family has more or less come to terms with the new circumstances, one of the young hereditary princes has recently been rebelling. Probably an old robber baron gene has broken through in him again. The situation has obviously reminded him of earlier hard times and he has been seized by the ambition to lead the House of Liechtenstein back to its former glory and splendor.«

»Has there ever been a comparably difficult situation before?«

»You bet! Before the Second World War, the House of Liechtenstein owned huge estates on the territory of today's Elbe domain in the then Sudetenland - about 1600 square kilometers! That corresponded to ten times the area of the principality on the Rhine. In addition, there were castles, manor houses and countless art objects. After Germany lost the war, all this property fell victim to the Beneš decrees. The Liechtensteiners were lumped together with the Germans and forcibly expropriated, although they were neither German nor had they cooperated with Nazi Germany. For years there was a struggle for restitution and compensation. It was not until many years after the founding of the European Union that Liechtenstein and the Czech Republic established diplomatic relations.«

»The Princely House seems to have coped quite well with the losses of the Second World War. After all, it was long considered the richest noble family in Europe!«

*»After the Second World War, a major lean period first began, during which the Principality had to reorganize itself financially. The prince at the time took his cue from his Swiss neighbors and slowly but steadily transformed his principality into an oasis for wealthy tax optimizers from all over the world. In the end, success proved him right.«*

*»And the present prince wants to emulate his ancestor in this regard?«*

*»You could say that. In our estimation, however, he is exaggerating a bit. After all, he is now laying claim to the Scottish throne as well!«*

*»Why is that?«*

*»It sounds crazy, but His Serene Highness in Liechtenstein is a descendant of the Stuarts through the family branch of his grandmother, Sophie of Bavaria. He is considered by the Jacobites to be the rightful heir to the British throne. And after the Scots broke away from Little Britain - meaning England and Wales - by referendum, His Serene Highness sees himself as the future Scottish King!«*

*»This is completely crazy!«*

*»Perhaps, but from the point of view of the rules of succession, this claim cannot be entirely dismissed. As long as his relatives renounce their claims, he is the only candidate who comes into question as Scottish monarch. Of course, the Scots are not very enthusiastic about this crazy Rhinelander's claim. And they have already made it clear to him. But apparently this only stirs up his ambition even more.«*

*»That's all well and fine,« Jan says, »but that belongs more in the gossip magazines I read at the hairdresser. The question that arises is rather: Is there a connection between our target and the young prince?«*

*»That will be your task to find out, my dear Jan,« his boss answers dryly. »Find out in which illustrious circles His Serene*

*Highness is wont to move and, above all, how he comes by all the money with which he finances his escapades.«*

*»All right!« Jan answers and looks at the clock. »Are we through for the day?«*

*»I think so! Please let me know about these two civilians. I'd rather you didn't involve them in this!«*

*»I know. I don't have a good feeling about it either. On the other hand, this tracking software would be a unique opportunity to get to those behind the conspiracy. At the moment, however, it is not even certain whether this Mr. Jonas will even take me up on my offer. But if he does, I will do everything I can to get rid of them as soon as possible.«*

*»Promise?«*

*»I promise! But now I'm hungry and on my way to the Hofbräuhaus. I'll be in touch as soon as I have any news. Give my best to the colleagues!«*

*»Good luck, Jan! And bon appétit!«*

## **Vaduz**

During the drive to Vienna, Gianna and David discuss whether they should take up Jan's offer. David was in favor of it from the start, but feared that Gianna would put a spoke in his wheel. Gianna, however, sees a unique opportunity to accompany this manhunt with her camera and to process the resulting film and photo material into an exciting report. Perhaps this would pave the way for her new professional life. Upon their arrival in Vienna, both are determined to embark on this adventure and pack up their belongings in order to lose as little time as possible the next morning.

The phone rings promptly at seven in the morning. David presses the answer button and activates the hands-free system.

*»David Jonas here!«*



*»Jan Eckert here! Good morning, Mr. Jonas. Well, have you come to a decision?«*

*»Good morning, Mr. Eckert. Yes, my girlfriend and I have agreed to accompany you. Where are you at the moment?«*

*»I am glad to hear that! I am currently in Munich and would like to ask you to get on the next plane and come to me. There are already two flight tickets for you at the Danube-Domain-Tours counter at Vienna Airport. Take the first plane with two seats available and send me a short message before boarding telling me when you expect to arrive. I will then pick you up directly at the Munich airport.«*

*»So how long are we going to be traveling with you?«*

*»Take some clothes for a week. That should be enough in any case. And definitely don't forget your computer with the tracking software!«*

Gianna considers whether she should talk to Jan Eckert about her reportage plans. But before she gets a possible rejection, she keeps her mouth shut for the time being.

Half an hour later, Gianna and David are in a cab to the airport. It is shortly after half past eight when their plane takes off. And shortly before ten, the two are already entering the public arrivals area of Munich's Markus-Söder-Airport.

Jan is already waiting impatiently for them and leads them to his car in the short-term parking zone in front of the terminal. David and Gianna are amazed when they see the chunky black DKW X8 with its mirrored windows. They stow their things in the trunk and make themselves comfortable in the back. Before Jan drives off, however, he holds a form in front of their noses:

*»Please sign! It's just a formality.«*

*»Technicality or not,« David grumbles uncomprehendingly. »I'd really like to know what we're supposed to sign.«*

*»You must confirm with your signature that you accompany me at your own risk and that you do not hold the Rhine Domain liable for any damage to life and limb that may occur.«*

*»I didn't realize that the intelligence services were just as bureaucratic as other government agencies,« David laughs, and sets about signing his name to the form.*

*»Just a moment, Mr. Eckert!« Gianna interrupts him. »I have one more question: I would like to document our trip with the camera and possibly turn the material into a report later. Do you have a problem with that?«*

*»Are you insane?« Jan replies, horrified. »Why do you think we call ourselves a secret service? Do you think we upload our actions to the Internet afterwards? That's impossible!«*

*»I will, of course, take care to keep you out of sight. And I promise you that I won't publish anything that doesn't have your explicit consent.«*

*»No, absolutely not! Then where are we going to get there?«*

*»If that's the case, then I'm not going! David come on, we're getting off!«*

David doesn't quite know how to behave. On the one hand, Gianna's bitching about that stupid camera gets on his nerves. On the other hand, he doesn't want to stab her in the back. He turns to Jan as a mediator:

*»Don't be like that, Mr. Eckert. If my girlfriend promises you that she won't film or photograph anything confidential, then you can believe her. Make an effort, and she will sign her form, too!«*

Jan considers whether he should simply confiscate David's notebook and send the two stubborn guys packing. But he comes to the conclusion that without David, he probably wouldn't even be able to unlock the computer, let alone operate the tracking software. Besides, he's in the Danube domain here and had better not do anything that might give the appearance of illegal usurpation of authority. Grumbling, he agrees:

*»But you've been warned: if you film or take pictures without my permission, there will be big trouble! Is that clear?«*

Gianna grins and signs the form. She has to familiarize herself with the technology of this camera during the trip anyway. David is amazed at how enthusiastic Gianna is about his old 32-megapixel camera. He himself had only ever used it for simple snapshots. But, of course, it can also be used for video recordings. And the quality is still orders of magnitude better than what Gianna is used to from her Roman equipment.

Jan is a little annoyed that he gave in so quickly. But at least he has wrung the much-needed signature from the two of them, without which the administration in Cologne would have given him hell. As they leave the heavy traffic of the Munich area behind them, his mood improves and he finally thinks:

*»Since we are a team as of now, I suggest we stop with the formalities. My name is Jan.«*

Gianna and David gladly accept the offer to be on first-name terms in the future. The ice begins to melt and a relaxed atmosphere develops in the car as it roars along at high speed.

*»I received a new signal from our target, by the way,« David says.  
»It came from Lake Maggiore.«*

*»From the lake?« Jan asks, startled. »I hope the guy didn't sink his cell phone in it!«*

*»Then you would hardly be able to locate it! No, our person switched on the cell phone in the town of Stresa and then sailed across the lake to a small island called Isola Bella. There the cell phone remained switched on until this morning.«*

*»How exactly can your software actually locate the phone?«*

*»It depends on where it is. In densely populated areas where there are many cell towers, the accuracy is much better than somewhere in the sticks.«*

*»Can you tell me exactly where the signal from Vaduz came from?«*

*»I can look that up. Do we actually have wifi in this car or do I have to use my smartphone to access the Internet?«*

*»At this rental price, I really hope we have Wi-Fi!« Jan replies and shoos the car in front of him out of the passing lane by flashing his headlights.*

David flips open his notebook, sets the tracking program's time stamp to yesterday morning, and zooms in on the map.

*»So - if I'm reading this correctly, the signal came directly from Vaduz Castle!«*

*»I almost thought so,« Jan murmurs, »Then we'll pay the lord of the castle a visit!«*

*»What you thought?« Gianna asks curiously.*

*»This Prince of Liechtenstein seems to be a strange person. I wouldn't be surprised if he was involved in this money laundering business.«*

Jan tells David and Gianna what he learned from his boss about the prince and the history of the Liechtensteins. When he has finished, it is not far to Lake Constance. Signs already announce the approaching watershed to the Rhine domain. Before the border station, vehicles pile up in a long queue. Jan passes the waiting cars in the special lane for emergency vehicles and shows the customs officials his diplomatic passport. The customs officers raise their right hand in salute to the peaked cap and let the vehicle pass without further inspection. Shortly thereafter, the three pass the Rhenish Sea - Lake Constance - in Bregenz, and around noon they reach Vaduz, the former capital of the Principality of Liechtenstein.

*»The castle is up there!« Jan calls out and enters the destination into the navigation system via voice control.*

The journey initially takes them through the tranquil town. Then the navigation system directs them onto a steep mountain road, and a few minutes later the defiant castle appears in front of them. Jan parks directly in front of the wrought-iron gate.

*»It doesn't look very inviting,« he says, pointing to a large sign next to the gate.*

*Private property  
No castle tour  
Admission prohibited*

Jan presses the button on the intercom.

*»You can wait a long time there!« someone calls out to him.*

It is an old farmer who is about to lead a cow down the road into the village. Disgruntled, he shakes his head as he pulls the animal behind him on a rope. Jan walks up to him and asks:

*»Is the prince not at home?«*

The farmer, however, does not pay him a glance and goes his way with the dairy cattle.

*»Not very talkative, the good man,« Jan says to David and Gianna.*

*»That's what you get for going about things the wrong way,« Gianna says flippantly.*

*»Should I have put my gun in his face to make him more talkative?«*

*»No!« laughs Gianna. »Violence is not always a solution. I would have done things differently here.«*

*»And how, pray tell, does that work?« asks Jan, slightly annoyed.*

Gianna thinks for a moment. Then she takes David's camera and starts a new video recording.

*»Here David, take it! I'll now show you what a running camera does to a person. Always keep it close on me and the man!«*

Then, followed by her stunned friend, she runs after the old man and his cow.

*»Excuse me, my name is Gianna Marconi from GiMa TV! May I ask you a few questions? You seem to know a lot about the local area and the Princely House!«*

*»Are you from television, young lady?« the farmer asks, visibly unsettled.*

*»Yes, from GiMa TV. Would you briefly explain to our viewers why the prince is so dismissive of visitors?«*

*»Well, every child here knows that His Serene Highness has no interest in associating with the common people. I suppose you are not from here?«*

*»Yes, you're absolutely right, I was most recently a foreign correspondent in Vienna and Rome, and this is the first time I've been here in this area.«*

*»Vienna and Rome?« repeats the peasant with wide eyes and stops. »And so you come here to us the province and are interested in our old princely castle?«*

*»Well, our viewers would like to know if what is said about the prince is true.«*

The farmer strokes his thinning hair sheepishly and looks uncertainly at David's camera.

*»Well, I could tell you quite a few things! I already knew His Serene Highness when he was still a small child, walking through the town on the hand of his grandmother, good old Sophie. He*

*used to be a really nice knee-high boy. Until he grew up and then a few years ago the thing happened in the Beizen<sup>50</sup>.«*

*»You'll have to explain that in more detail to our viewers!«  
Gianna tries to encourage the old man to keep talking.*

*»Well, nobody in the village knows exactly what happened. Only that one day such a distinguished older gentleman invited the entire princely family to dinner in the small hall of the inn. Nobody knows what was discussed there! Only that it must have given still during the dinner a giant argument in the family. My niece worked there as a waitress at the time and witnessed the quarrel firsthand. The strange old gentleman was chased out of the restaurant by some members of the family, so angry were they suddenly with him. After that, however, he was seen several times in Vaduz, accompanied by the young Serene Highness. That was also the time when the young Serene Highness broke off contact with his family. Since then, they have not exchanged a word with each other. The young Serene Highness then started to repair the castle and make it habitable again. After the big crash, all kinds of riffraff crawled in there and took everything that wasn't nailed down. God knows where His Serene Highness got all the money for the renovation work. Not from his family, at any rate. They themselves have only the bare necessities of life.«*

*»Do you know, then, who this older gentleman was who caused this dispute and what it was about?«*

*»No, nothing has ever been known about the cause of the quarrel, and as for the stranger, all that is known is that he is not from around here. It is said that he has been to the castle several times recently and has met with His Serene Highness. But there are quite a few rumors about who's been up there. For the common people, the castle is a forbidden zone. It is said to have already happened that the guards have set the dogs on uninvited guests!«*

*»Did you notice anyone who was in the castle yesterday?«*

*»No. Do you think I have nothing better to do than to watch who goes in and out of the castle every day? I keep as far away as*

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50 Beiz: Swiss term for a simple inn

*possible from the folks up there. It's none of my business! But now you'll have to excuse me. If you want to know more, you'll have to ask the people in Vaduz. But I don't think you'll find out much more there. There's just a lot of talk in the village. Whether it's always true is hard to say.«*

Gianna thanks the old man and goes back with David to Jan and the parked car. Jan watches the video in the car twice before he means:

*»It's a pity he didn't describe the old man in more detail. In any case, the story is very interesting. David, I would like to ask you to send the video by e-mail to my colleagues in Cologne. Please make sure that it is sufficiently encrypted! I don't want the material to fall into the wrong hands.«*

*»Are we going to stay longer in Vaduz?« Gianna asks. »We could ask a few more people in town if they've made any suspicious observations lately.«*

*»No,« Jan answers, shaking his head. »Unfortunately, we don't have any more time. It's still a long way to Lake Maggiore, and I really want to get there in daylight!«*

## **Heidiland**

They are barely back on the highway when Gianna asks:

*»When do we have lunch? My stomach is already in the back of my knees.«*

*»Good suggestion!« nods Jan. »I'm hungry too. I'll pull out at the next rest stop.«*

David also has no objections. His stomach has been growling incessantly for an hour. The three hungry detectives don't have to wait long before a large sign announces the next rest stop: "Service Area Heidiland - 3 km".

*»Oh how sweet!« exclaims Gianna. »Do you know Heidi? I loved that book when I was a little girl. Although I couldn't really imagine it with the high mountains. And now I'm sort of in the*



*middle of it! Do you think that the story of Heidi, Peter the goatherd and the Alm-Uncle was set here in this area?»*

David just shrugs his shoulders in boredom. He had never dealt with books for girls. And Jan, too, just says dryly:

*»No idea! All I know is that this Heidiland is now a well-known brand label that people here hope will boost their business.«*

Jan sets the right turn signal and brakes the car down to a normal speed before following the exit and stopping directly in front of the entrance to a fast food restaurant. Together they go inside and skim the spartan selection of food and drinks at the counter. Shortly afterwards, they leave the restaurant again - with three large Heidiburgers and three plastic cups full of brown, sweet fizzy drinks.

*»Let's stretch our feet a little more,« Jan suggests. »We'll be in the car long enough in the coming hours. Besides, I thought of something while standing in line in there. Come with me. I want to show you something.«*

Jan leads his expectant companions across the parking lot to the riverbed of the Rhine, which flows by directly behind the rest stop. Via a staircase, he climbs a small embankment from where there is a good view over the wide gravel bed.

*»Just look at this little river. It's hard to believe what a big stream it will become later on!«*

Gianna and David stand next to him, chewing and showing little enthusiasm.

*»So what?« David says with his mouth full and shrugs his shoulders.*

*»Okay, that's not the reason why I brought you here,« Jan apologizes. »Here - at this very spot - the Central European Crude Oil Pipeline once crossed the Rhine. This so-called CEL<sup>51</sup> was the most important lifeline in southern Germany. A million*

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51 CEL: Central European Line

*barrels of crude oil flowed through there every day and ensured the supply for the German gasoline refineries.«*

*»Is that the pipeline that was blown up near Genoa the other day?« Gianna asks, horrified.*

*»Exactly!« nods Jan. »However, only isolated sections of the original pipeline are still in operation today, such as the part between Genoa and Milan, where this attack took place recently. The CEL has since been replaced by the TAL<sup>52</sup>, which can pump much larger quantities of crude oil across the Alps.«*

*»Coincidences do exist!« Gianna wonders. »This assassination attempt on the CEL was the reason why the oil transport between Genoa and Milan was shifted to the railroad and David and I made this horror trip in the tank wagon!«*

Jan looks at Gianna a bit confused and doesn't really know what she is talking about. But he's not particularly interested, because he actually wants to tell them something completely different:

*»What I'm getting at is that 84 years ago, right here on this very spot, one of the greatest environmental catastrophes in human history almost ran its course. It was the time of the Cold War: the Soviet Union and the West were at enmity with each other. The eyes of the world were on Czechoslovakia, where the Soviets were brutally putting down the so-called Prague Spring with military force. At the time, the KGB was planning an explosive attack right here. In fact, there was a small bridge over the Rhine here, which was used by the CEL to cross the Rhine. The plan was to blow up this bridge and the pipeline running through it in such a way that the oil would have spilled into the Rhine and thus into nearby Lake Constance. What this would have meant for the largest drinking water reservoir in Europe, you can easily imagine!«*

*»How perverted is that!« David exclaims in disbelief. »What would the Russians have gained from such an environmental outrage?«*

*»Obviously, the aim was to divert the attention of the world population from the events in Prague. At that time, it was not uncommon for both sides to spread fear and terror with false flag actions<sup>53</sup>. In that respect, the West was not a bit better than the East.«*

*»And why was the plan not put into action?« Gianna wants to know.*

*»To this day, we don't really know. Maybe the whole thing is just a nasty rumor started by the Western secret services of the time. But maybe one of the Soviet intelligence officers also realized that such a crime cannot be justified by anything.«*

Jan looks at his watch and urges to hurry:

*»But now we have lost enough time. Let's move on. David, will you please check again right away to see if there has been any new radio contact with our target's cell phone in the meantime!«*

The three of them get back into their car and as soon as they are back on the highway, Jan presses down hard on the gas pedal.

*»No, there's no new cell phone location yet,« David reports with disappointment. »Probably our bomber is still on that island in Lake Maggiore.«*

*»Maybe we should turn on the car radio,« Gianna suggests. »In case there's already another bombing that we don't even know about yet.«*

*»I don't think so,« Jan laughs. »If there was, my colleagues would have informed me long ago.«*

*»Have you ever heard of this Isola Bella?« asks David. »I wonder what our person is doing on this island.«*

*»I don't know anything about it,« Gianna answers, »But translated into German, Isola Bella means: Beautiful Island.«*

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53 False flag operation: Intelligence term for a covert operation ostensibly carried out by someone else to conceal the identity and intentions of the actual author.

*»Come on!« David makes fun of her. »I would never have thought of that myself!«*

*»The name already means something to me,« says Jan. »As far as I know, it's a famous tourist attraction on Lake Maggiore. There's a beautiful castle there with an even more beautiful garden. It's really Bella! My mother wanted to go there. But my father vetoed it. It was probably too expensive for him. This region on Lake Maggiore is supposed to have once been quite sophisticated.«*

*»Do you think our person is planning an attack on a tourist destination?« Gianna asks, startled. »Maybe we should warn the authorities so they can evacuate the island.«*

*»You can't rule it out,« Jan answers, frowning. »But as long as we don't have any tangible evidence, no one will lightly issue a terror warning in such a tourist stronghold. How much money do you think is at stake! Besides, I have already informed the State Department that our target was there. They will know if and to whom they will pass on this information. If the man we are looking for is indeed a Russian, then he will probably be interested in the beauty of the island and visit it as a tourist - just like all other visitors. I wouldn't read too much into it just yet.«*

*»I don't know,« Gianna replies. »I kind of have a bad feeling about it.«*

There is an awkward silence inside the car for quite a while. Gianna and David have the impression that Jan puts his foot down even more. Hurray for modern road construction! Where in ancient times, travelers had to struggle through the deep, dangerous canyons of the Via Mala, the modern SUV<sup>54</sup> flies from one tunnel and bridge construction to the next. The mountains to the left and right of the highway become ever higher, more rugged and snow-covered.

*»Tell me Jan,« David asks, »can you actually remember the time when all this was still part of Switzerland?«*

*Jan grins: »Of course! Before the crash, I once spent a long weekend in Switzerland with my parents. We got as far as the Rhone Glacier back then. It still existed at that time! But this trip was a long time ago. I can't remember it exactly. I only remember how horrified my father was about the high prices. That was the first and last time we went there. I'm sure that the lurching of the Swiss franc at that time was already a harbinger of the looming collapse of the world financial system.«*

*»Wasn't that a hard blow for the Swiss when their nation disintegrated like that?« Gianna wonders. »They were always such great patriots and proud of the neutrality of their little country.«*

*»It was certainly a hard blow. But there was also no other alternative.«*

At that time, Switzerland covered five main domains - which, of course, were not called that at the time. Or rather: they were not paid any attention to at that time. The largest part of Switzerland had always been located in the Rhine domain, with the Reuss.Aare.Rhine sub-domain encompassing all of central Switzerland. The second largest part of Switzerland belonged to the Rhone river system. A few southern regions were in the Po River basin, and two tiny patches in the far east even drained into the Danube, and the Adige, respectively. In the past, Switzerland often served as a model for other states because its national identity was not based on a common language but on a belief in direct democracy and regional autonomy. In addition, Switzerland was seen as a guarantor of political stability and financial security. Until the Swiss had to learn the hard way during the great financial crash that one cannot live on luxury watches and worthless paper money. For years, the state had been pampered with money from wealthy individuals and institutions, so that it didn't even know what to do with it. The Swiss National Bank fired up the printing press and printed vast quantities of new Swiss francs. And the money was immediately snatched out of its hands by foreigners as a supposedly safe investment. Many billions of euros and dollars were stashed away by the

SNB with the intention of weakening the value of the Swiss franc and supporting the domestic export industry. Every year, the SNB reported new record profits from its stock and currency manipulation operations. Some of the money went into expensive infrastructure projects, such as elaborate tunnel construction. Until, at some point, the Swiss Alps had more holes than the famous Swiss cheese. The crash suddenly put an end to the big money and the Swiss had to learn to stand on their own two feet. This proved to be extremely difficult at first - after all, throughout history they had always cleverly kept out of their neighbors' problems and profited from the misery of others. Due to its one-sided orientation as a banking center, it suddenly found itself at the epicenter of the crisis and felt the effects firsthand. The first hunger winter was a terrible catastrophe for the people, and without the stockpiles of cheese and chocolate, there would certainly have been even more deaths from starvation. In the end, most Swiss considered it great good fortune when they were able to join one of the upstart main domains. And many a Swiss feels more at home in his new homeland than ever before because of the language.

*»I'm a bit suspicious of the Swiss!« Gianna admits. »I've only met one in my life, but he turned out to be a thief and stole my travel money!«*

*»But then you've come across a rather atypical representative of his kind,« Jan laughs. »The Swiss are generally regarded as very honest and hardworking people. Here on the Rhine, they're just about to outstrip the Swabians in terms of cleverness and not being able to speak High German.«*

Jan talks for quite a while about this great region once called Switzerland, which has many unique traditions. He lectures about alphorns, with which the alpine herdsmen communicated across valleys, about the Swiss Army Knife, which in its original form contained neither a laser pointer nor a USB stick, and about the dense railroad network, on which even crocodiles<sup>55</sup> were harnessed in front of the wagons. At some point, it

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55 Crocodile: nickname for the Ce 6/8 and Be 6/8 series of the Swiss Federal Railways

becomes too much for his young companions and they nod off in the comfortable leather seats of the monotonously roaring automobile.

But their midday nap is short-lived. When Jan sees the domain boundary facility at the north portal of the San Bernardino Tunnel looming ahead of him, he calls out loudly:

*»Hey, wake up you sleepyheads! We're leaving Heidiland!«*

## **A Farewell to Arms**

Behind the main Alpine watershed at the San Bernardino Pass, the Moësa.Ticino.Po sub-domain begins. The road leads in wide hairpin bends from the cool heights of the main Alpine ridge down to the sun-drenched region of Ticino. Inside the fully air-conditioned luxury automobile, there is not yet much sign of the rising temperatures. But when Jan and his companions take a short coffee break near Bellinzona, the sun beats down on them mercilessly. *»Almost like home in Rome,«* Gianna sighs softly, breathing in the hot, humid air as if it were a piece of home.

Behind Locarno, the lakeside road begins, winding seemingly endlessly along the western shore of Lake Maggiore. Around four o'clock in the afternoon, they finally reach the fashionable spa town of Stresa at the foot of Monte Mottarone. Jan follows the instructions of the navigation system until, in front of the main entrance of the Grand Hotel Des Iles Borromees, the redeeming phrase is heard:

*»You have reached your destination!«*

*»Wow!«* Gianna and David proclaim as if from the same mouth as they stand in awe before the imposing facade of the time-honored luxury hotel. *»This is where we're going to spend the night tonight?«*

*»Why not?«* Or have you ever seen an agent stay at the youth hostel in the movies?«

The valet parking officer rushes over and takes Jan's car keys. Before he drives the car into the hotel garage, he heaves the three suitcases out of the

trunk and hands them over to his young colleague from the luggage service. This one accompanies the new arrivals to the reception desk.

*»Good afternoon, my name is Jan Eckert. Two suites have been reserved in my name.«*

*»Buongiorno Signore Eckert,« replies the elegantly dressed concierge behind the counter, and then continues in perfect German. »We have kept suites 105 and 106 free for you. With a view out to the lake. I hope that is to your liking.«*

*»Is the bar open yet?« Jan wants to know. »We'd like to have a little refreshment before we go upstairs to our rooms.«*

*»Of course! Always in this direction,« says the concierge, pointing to the end of the lobby. »In the meantime, would you like us to take your luggage upstairs?«*

*»That would be nice of you,« Jan replies, already making off in the direction of the bar.*

*»If you could perhaps leave me your IDs here until then. Then I could take care of the necessary formalities in the meantime.«*

Gianna is a little unsettled when she slides her stay permit from the Viennese Aliens' Registration Office over the counter. But the concierge takes no offense at all and calmly puts the three ID documents among his papers.

*»I wish you a pleasant stay in our house!« he calls after his guests, while they are already impatiently making off in the direction of the bar.*

*»Why are you in such a hurry to get to the bar?« David asks in astonishment. »Surely they have a minibar in every room in this luxury place. Do you have a drinking problem?«*

*»I'm not here to drink, I'm here to talk,« Jan gruffly instructs him. »I'm here to talk to someone who knows the local lay of the land. And in my experience, that's always the bartender!«*



The man in the white coat behind the mahogany counter hardly notices them at first when they take their seats on the delicate bar stools. He is probably around Jan's age and gives the impression that he has spent his entire life behind this counter.

*»What will it be, ladies and gentlemen?« he asks in almost accent-free German when he finally turns to his only customer.*

David orders a cappuccino and Gianna a caffè doppio. Jan, on the other hand, asks the bartender what he can recommend.

*»The specialty of our house is the dry Martini,« the man behind the counter replies, somewhat bored.*

*David whispers to Gianna, »Now he's about to ask him if he wants it shaken or stirred!«*

The barista grins broadly at David and points to the wall, where two old, framed black-and-white photos are hanging. The same man can obviously be seen in both. Once as a young soldier in military uniform and the other time as an old sea dog in a thick turtleneck sweater.

*»I think you've got something mixed up there, young man,« he says as he fills the espresso machine with fresh powder.*

*»Isn't that that American writer - what was his name again?« wonders Jan as he looks at the pictures.*

*»Ernest Hemingway - our most famous guest, without wanting to offend our other celebrity guests. My great-grandfather knew him personally! By the way, he also worked here in the house as a barista. Ancient family tradition - if you will. In any case, the good Ernesto appreciated our dry Martini very much when he was curing his war injury in our hotel.«*

The bartender tells for the hundred thousandth time how the young Hemingway served as a medic on the Italian Alpine front in World War I, almost lost a leg in a shell strike, and then later processed his experiences in his novel "A Farewell to Arms". Finally, however, he says:

*»But you certainly didn't come here to beautiful Lake Maggiore to follow in the footsteps of an old writer and martini drinker!«*

*»Right!« Jan replies, »we want to relax a bit in the coming days and explore the area. I've heard there are a few islands worth seeing here!«*

*»Oh yes!« the bartender dutifully replies. »A boat trip to Isola Madre and Isola dei Pescatori, the Fishermen's Island, is definitely not to be missed.«*

*»Yes, and to Isola Bella, of course!« adds Gianna. »It's supposed to be the most beautiful!«*

*»But Signorina,« the barista replies, »unfortunately you are a few years too late for Isola Bella. The island is privately owned and the new owner doesn't want to see visitors on his isle.«*

Jan thinks he has misheard:

*»Privately owned? I always thought the islands belonged to the state and washed millions into the taxman's soggy coffers!«*

*»Not at all!« waves off the man behind the counter. »Why do you think they are called the 'Borromeo Islands'? Because they have been owned by the noble Borromeo family since the twelfth century. Unfortunately, due to the unfortunate events of recent years, the highborn have become so impoverished that they have had to squander their last silk shirts. Isola Bella was bought at a bargain price by a private investor about whom almost nothing is known. Only that he is called 'the Count' and is said to be a real maverick. For a while he tolerated the flourishing tourist business on his island. But at some point he apparently had enough of the tourists trampling the borders in the park and bringing unrest to his magnificent palace. Since then, there has been no access to the island. But don't feel bad: the other two islands are also very beautiful!«*

You can literally see Jan's thoughts jumping back and forth in his head as he tries to fit this new information into his existing world view.

Meanwhile, the bartender is preparing the martini. He takes a frozen glass

goblet from the CO<sub>2</sub> cooler and places it on the counter, where the condensing humidity immediately coats it with a silky matt finish. He then fills the cocktail mixer with ice and pours a little vermouth over it. He shakes the icy mixture well for a while, but then pours all the liquid down the sink, to David and Gianna's great astonishment. Then it seems he makes a second attempt: with plenty of gin and a dash of orange bitters, he fills his blender and carefully begins to work the icy broth with his stirring rod. This almost ritualistic act only comes to an end when he carefully pours the result of his efforts through a fine sieve into the cold glass and decorates it with a slice of lemon before casually handing it to Jan.

*»Here you go. One dry Martini, house style. To your health!«*

Now that everyone has something to drink, the bartender puts two small bowls of salted almonds and potato chips on the counter. Meanwhile, Jan sips his drink carefully so as not to freeze his lips on the icy rim of the glass.

*»Hmm, excellent!« he praises the quality of the martini, earning satisfied looks from his counterpart behind the bar. Then he casually asks, »Do you happen to know who I could contact here to rent a motorboat?«*

*»Well, there are quite a few yacht rental companies here in Stresa and the surrounding municipalities. At the reception you will find various offers in all price categories.«*

*»A yacht rental would probably be a bit excessive for our purposes. What I have in mind is rather a small boat with an outboard motor. We'd like to cross to Fishermen's Island tonight and would hate to be dependent on the sailing times of the big ferries, if you know what I mean.«*

*»I understand,« the bartender nods in trained understanding. »You're absolutely right: the atmosphere over there is really at its most tranquil when the tourist crowds have disappeared again and the locals are back among themselves. But you can easily*

*charter a small boat, have it ferry you across, and have it pick you up again later, at any time you like.«*

*»But we would rather explore Fishermen's Island on our own. I've always wanted to play captain myself. Don't you know anyone who would lend his boat to us tonight. It certainly won't fail because of the price.«*

The bartender thinks for a moment and then says:

*»My cousin has a boat that might be a good fit for you. I'd be happy to give him a call.«*

Jan nods in agreement and the man disappears into a back room directly adjacent to his work area. After a few minutes, he returns beaming with joy and announces:

*»My cousin agrees! If you want, you can look at the boat right now and negotiate the price with him.«*

*»Very good!« Jan is pleased. »Where can we find your cousin?«*

*»Luigi!« the bartender calls loudly in the direction of the reception.*

A moment later, a liveried chauffeur comes rushing over.

*»Luigi, why don't you give our guests a quick ride to Renato's at the lake?«*

Ten minutes later, Jan and Renato Barcarini are already in agreement. The wind- and weather-beaten sailor with the white-blue captain's cap is thinking frantically about what else this strange customer and his young companions might need a boat for this evening. He finally suspects that Jan is a generous father who wants to enable his son and his girlfriend to have a romantic, nocturnal tête-à-tête on the Isola Madre. With the thick bundle of money that Jan holds in front of his nose, however, he quickly dispenses with further questions about a boat license or the meaning and purpose of this unusual request. Barcarini briefly and routinely instructs his customers in the operation of the motorboat and gives them the usual

rules of conduct: not to take the right of way from the big ships and to stay away from the Isola Bella at all costs! Afterwards he hands over the keys to Jan and wishes the three of them a nice evening and a lot of fun with his boat.

## **Isola Bella**

The church clock in Stresa has just struck ten o'clock. Jan, David and Gianna get their boat ready and cast off from the jetty. It is a pleasantly warm summer night. The heat of the day is still captured in every stone. The full moon is shrouded by a few thin veil clouds. The dim light shining through eerily illuminates the large, black lake and the surrounding mountain landscape. Far out, the bright lights of Fishermen's Island are clearly visible. The pulsating life there can still be felt even at the great distance. Much closer - directly in front of them, so to speak - on the other hand lies Isola Bella: cold, dark, threatening and forbidding.

*»We're going to Fishermen's Island first,« Jan says, pushing the throttle forward as far as it will go.*

The engine yelps loudly, causing the bow of the boat to rise out of the water.

*»That must be the old ship dock up ahead,« David surmises as they pass the forbidden island at a fair distance.*

*»Just look at the old houses on the shore!« exclaims Gianna, trying to drown out the loud engine. »Really creepy looking, so lonely and deserted.«*

Only when they get close to the palace, a faint glow of light can be seen from one of the countless windows.

*»Did you see?« David calls out. "There's another little harbor right in front of the palace, and there are some boats there, too.«*

Meanwhile, Jan continues to steer a course toward Fishermen's Island further to the northwest. Only when the loud music of the dance hall at the

southern tip of the island can be heard he turns the rudder to starboard and direct the boat out into the dark expanse of the lake ahead.

*»Do you see that dark island back there?« Jan shouts against the wind. »That must be Isola Madre!«*

*»What exactly are you up to now?« Gianna shouts.*

*»We'll give Isola Bella a wide berth and then approach it from the seaward side. I will dock there and look around a bit.«*

*»Do you think then that our man is still on the island?«*

*»How should I know? As long as we don't receive a new homing signal, we have to assume it. In any case, it is now clear that he is not planning an attack on a tourist facility, nor has he come here for sightseeing. It rather looks like this island count, just like the prince from Liechtenstein, has dirt on him in this affair!«*

The boat struggles rocking through the gentle swell of the huge lake. It is completely calm, but you notice that you are no longer protected from the swell by the offshore islands out here. How would it feel if the sea wind called "Inferno" were to blow up with full force right now?

*»Why does a single count actually need such a large palace?« Gianna asks at the sight of the massive residence, which sits enthroned like the bridge of a cruise ship on the northern tip of Isola Bella and is clearly visible from three sides of the island.*

*»Just to live in a manner befitting my station,« David answers, shrugging his shoulders. »Practical considerations sometimes have to take a back seat.«*

After a while, however, the palace disappears from view and all that can be seen is the silhouette of the extensive terraced parks.

*»We'll moor up ahead there!« shouts Jan as he spots a small cove surrounded by tall trees.*

He slows down the speed of the motor and slowly approaches the targeted shore.

*»Listen! You stay in the boat and wait until I'm back! If I'm not back in an hour, you go back alone and contact my office at the hotel. You can find the phone number here on my card.«*

Jan hands David his business card, just as if the two were in a business meeting.

*»I have my cell phone with me, but I'll leave it turned off for now as a precaution. Do you have your cell phones on?«*

Gianna shakes her head. She has never owned one in her entire life and has not felt the need to get one during her stay in Vienna so far. David nods against this and taps on the breast pocket of his shirt. He had already given Jan his cell phone number at the hotel.

*»Good! If I need help, I'll get back to you. But just in case, turn on the vibrating alarm! It wouldn't be so great if your ringtone was thudding through the silence here.«*

The boat is only a few meters away from the rocks of the shore. Jan switches off the engine and reaches into his jacket pocket. He pulls out a black balaclava and pulls it over his head. Now he is dressed in black from head to toe and looks very scary - like a professional burglar on the prowl. Only his white eyeballs flash out of the narrow slit in the hood. Then he pulls his Walther PPK out of the shoulder holster, loads it through and slides it back into the holster secured. Seconds later, the bottom of the boat scrapes across the sharp rocks of the small bay. Jan climbs over the small windshield onto the stem and jumps over the bow railing to land. He pulls the boat up a little, gives his companions a quick thumbs-up and disappears into the darkness.

He crawls up the steep bank on all fours until he suddenly stands in front of a high wall. The wall stones are rough enough, however, that they provide sufficient handholds for climbing up. In the meantime, his eyes have also become accustomed to the darkness of the park, whose dense treetops allow only a fraction of the already weak moonlight to reach the ground. Inch by inch, Jan struggles up the wall until he finally reaches its

upper end, more or less elegantly heaves himself over the edge and finds himself on a terraced plateau. From there he follows a narrow trail that leads further up toward the palace. Suddenly, the trees to the left and right of the path end and he comes to a gravel path that runs straight toward a couple of accurately trimmed hedges. It is obviously a small ornamental labyrinth, but it does not make any great demands on the orientation skills of the respective passerby. Left, right, straight ahead, right and left again. When Jan leaves the hedge ensemble behind him, a large lawn opens up in front of him, at the end of which the dark back of the palace is clearly visible.

Now it's getting dangerous! Jan has to leave the protective cover of the dark park and creeps, as quietly as the coarse-grained gravel under his soles allows, in the direction of the palace. Halfway there, he can see that a light is burning in one of the halls on the first floor. He quickens his steps and tries to leave the open field behind him as quickly as possible and reach the protective facade wall. Once there, he presses his back flat against the wall and observes the surrounding terrain for a while. There is dead silence around him. Only from the direction of the park the monotonous singing of the cicadas penetrates quietly over. When he catches his breath, he creeps along the facade until he reaches the brightly lit window. Carefully and slowly, he leans forward until he catches a glimpse of the interior. The sight that presents itself to him is as impressive as it is bizarre. The bright light shines from a gigantic crystal chandelier hanging in the center of the hall's high ceiling. The room's décor can only be described as sumptuous. Oil paintings, tapestries, baroque furniture and fine porcelain vases as far as the eye can see. But the monumental mural opposite Jan's window is largely covered by a canvas. And in front of it sit five old men, partly in elegant tapestry armchairs, partly in modern wheelchairs. The sight seems so unreal and strange that Jan inevitably squints his eyes to make sure that his perception is not playing a trick on him. He feels as if he is experiencing *déjà vu*<sup>56</sup>. The scene abruptly

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56 *Déjà vu*: Psychological phenomenon that manifests itself in the feeling of having experienced a certain situation before.



reminds him of the time when, as a child, he visited his grandfather in the nursing home in the small town west of Cologne. It was shortly before Christmas and Jan had not found his grandfather in his room as usual. After a long search, he finally found him in the large dining room where the old folks had gathered and where a volunteer caregiver was showing them slides of their bowling club's trip to Boppard on the Middle Rhine. Something similar seems to be happening in here, behind the walls of this venerable baroque palace. In addition to the five old men, Jan sees another man who, although his back is turned to him, seems to be rather Jan's age, based on his stature and other appearance. He is holding something in his hand and Jan deduces from his movements that it is probably the remote control of the beamer, which projects one idyllic landscape image after another onto the large screen.

Jan takes his small spy camera out of his jacket pocket and starts taking pictures through the window. The presumed natural history slide show ends abruptly, however, and a kind of data table appears on the screen, the text of which Jan unfortunately cannot read at a distance. »I should have brought my glasses!« he grumbles to himself and has to admit once again that he is slowly reaching the age when top agents should start thinking about retirement or at least about a move to the back office. Undaunted, he holds his camera up to the window and hopes that this way he can at least gain some valuable information while working through this night shift. No sooner has he pressed the shutter release than he hears footsteps on the gravel path.

Jan ducks even closer to the wall and takes cover behind a large flowerpot. The footsteps come closer. Through the branches of the greenery, he spots a tall guard in the moonlight, carrying a walkie-talkie in his left hand and a firearm in his right. Step by step he gets closer and it can't be long before he spots him behind his cover. All the muscles in Jan's body are tensed to breaking point when the guard suddenly stops in front of him and looks him in the eyes, startled. Jan takes advantage of the moment of shock and jumps out from behind the bucket. With his left hand he pushes his

opponent's weapon aside, while his right fist bores into the pit of his stomach with full force. Two more well-aimed blows follow and the guard lies unconscious on the floor. Jan takes the radio and the firearm and decides to retreat. As fast as he can, he runs back across the open area towards the protecting park. Halfway there, he gets rid of the unnecessary ballast and throws the man's equipment away from him. On the last meters before the labyrinth, he accelerates his run once more to dive into the protection of the tall botany a few seconds later - but it turns out differently: Instead of the dark corridors of the thuja forest, he runs straight into the steel fist of another guard who has hidden behind the hedge and waited calmly for the arrival of his victim. When Jan awakens from his daze, his hands are already fixed to his back with a cable tie. The man with the hard fist pulls him rudely up from the floor and pushes him in front of him at gunpoint, cursing loudly in Italian. In the baroque facade of the palace, one window after the other now lights up brightly. It seems as if they want to give Jan a proper reception.

## **Session break**

Boris Luganov is in the middle of an important meeting when he is suddenly startled by a suspicious noise.

*»Gentlemen, did you just hear that too?«*

His clients look at him in amazement and shake their heads. His instinct, however, tells him that something is wrong here and he had better make sure:

*»I think it's time to take a short break anyway and let some fresh air in. I suggest that we meet back here in ten minutes and then begin the last item on the agenda. Please excuse me for that long. I'm going to step outside for a moment and have a smoke.«*

He leaves the meeting room and walks quickly through a long corridor until he finally reaches the exit to the courtyard. He takes a few deep breaths before tapping a cigarette from the newly started pack and lighting it with his gold-plated lighter.

A few seconds after the nicotine begins to take effect in his lungs, his hearing turns into that of a predator. Tensely, he listens into the silence of the night to see if a suspicious noise can be heard somewhere. But with the best will in the world, he can't hear anything unusual.

»It's about time that this long day finally comes to an end,« he thinks to himself while he smokes his cigarette with hasty puffs. This is one hell of a location! But he had really gotten to know enough unusual conference locations in the past few days. One more week of stress! Then the pending jobs will be done and he will fly back to St. Petersburg as a rich man. Actually, he has nothing against stress. He even needs it to be able to perform at his best. Stress is his elixir of life and will probably be the death of him at some point. He should stop smoking! And with the vodka binge, too. But what would life be without alcohol and cigarettes. Meaningless - like without women, gambling and all the other beautiful things that money can buy. Everything in life revolves around money. "Money makes the world go around!" The Americans recognized this early on and based their entire social system on it. But they failed miserably - with their soft capitalism. It is a fallacy that one can achieve prosperity or even wealth through hard and honest work. The common people are perhaps stupid enough to believe in such imbecilic promises. But a Boris Luganov knows how the wind blows, who pulls strings of power and how to take advantage of this knowledge.

Boris Luganov kicks out his cigarette on the floor and is about to go back into the meeting room - when he hears another strange noise from the other end of the yard. »Damn - something's fishy here!« he thinks to himself and pulls his pistol out of its holster. »I want to know what's going on here!«

## **Snipers**

David and Gianna have been waiting for Jan's return for more than twenty minutes.

*»I'm getting tired of this,« Gianna says, making moves to leave the boat. »I'm going to look around a bit.«*

*»Don't go far away!« David admonishes her. »If Jan comes back and you're not here, we'll be in big trouble!«*

*»Now don't get your knickers in a twist! I just want to stretch my feet a little. Besides, I have to go to the bathroom for little girls!«*

She climbs the steep embankment until she stands in front of the wall. »I wonder if Jan climbed up there?« she wonders. »But he must have, because there's no other way to get on here!«

Gianna examines the wall stones and thinks to herself, »If he got up there, I'll manage easily! Besides, we can't miss each other.«

Gianna has always been a very good climber. She deftly pulls herself up handle by handle and quickly reaches the terrace lying at the top. »That was easy! I wonder if David can see me up here?« From her vantage point, however, all she can see is the dense canopy of riparian trees. The boat must be hidden somewhere below. »What a great view of the lake from up here! How great it must look during the day!« She reaches into her jacket pocket and pulls out David's camera. »Let's see if this marvel of technology can still produce decent pictures in the moonlight.« She presses the shutter button and looks disappointedly at the image on the display. A few points of light can be seen from the opposite shore. Otherwise, however, everything is black.

Gianna listens into the night. When will Jan finally come back? Maybe she could still walk along this trail. This seems to be the only way anyway. The camera in her hand and the proximity to the palace fire her imagination. What possibilities open up here for a photographer and blogger! The count at dinner with his family. Or even the Count and Countess in the illuminated pool having aquasex! Gianna remembers what she had learned about the so-called paparazzi during her journalism training and quickly recollects what it means to do serious reporting. »Just a little way up this path! If I don't see the palace right away, I'll just turn back.«

Gianna follows the trail until she reaches the labyrinth. What was that noise just now? She creeps around three of the twisted hedges - then her heartbeat stops for a moment in shock. Not three meters in front of her, she sees two men. One is lying defenseless on the ground, while the other is tying him up, cursing loudly. Gianna holds her breath and hides behind the hedge. When one man pulls his victim up and demands in Italian to get up, Gianna slaps her hands in front of her mouth. The bound man is Jan! In shock, she remains in her hiding place while Jan is led away by the ruffian. What should she do? If her eyes do not deceive her, the man is now even holding a pistol! Desperately she searches for an object with which she could arm herself. Her eyes land on a small marble angel guarding the entrance to the labyrinth. »Now or never!« Gianna thinks to herself, takes the white baroque angel from its pedestal and runs as fast as she can after the two men. The man's constant loud cursing prevents him from hearing his pursuer coming from behind. His foul-mouthed volleys of words only end when Gianna gathers all her strength and smashes the heavy angel with full force on the back of his head.

As if struck by lightning, he falls to the ground and remains motionless. Jan is also startled. The first time by the crash of the marble figure. And the second time when he turns around and sees Gianna standing in front of him.

*»Didn't I tell you to wait by the boat?« is his first reaction.*

*»A simple thank you would have sufficed!« Gianna replies in a huff.*

*»Sorry! Thank you for freeing me from this awkward situation. Now please get my pocket knife out of my pants pocket and cut the ties!«*

Gianna searches the pockets of Jan's pants and finally unearths a Swiss Army knife.

*»Quick! Fold out the big blade! The guy's coming around already!«*

The guard actually starts to slowly get up again. Gianna struggles for a few seconds with the folding mechanism of the pocket knife, but then manages to lever out one of the knives and cut the thin cable tie on Jan's wrists. The guard is already staggering back toward Jan and Gianna with a grim look on his face. But because Jan has his hands free in the meantime, he can give his opponent a few of his often trained blows and sends him back into the realm of dreams.

*»Let's get out of here now!«*

Gianna and Jan run as fast as they can back to the boat. When they reach the terrace, they jump down from the wall with a daring leap and roll down the steep slope until they stop just before the boat.

*»Go on! Start the engine already!« Jan calls out to the stunned David as he helps Gianna get into the boat.*

Before he jumps on himself, he gives the boat a strong push to free it from the rocky bottom. When all three are sitting in the cockpit, David gives full throttle and tries to gain distance from the island. Jan leaves the steering to David and instead keeps a wary eye on what is happening on the island. They circle the southern tip in a wide arc. In the meantime, a few thick clouds have appeared in front of the moon. But the big towers and the terraces at the end of the park are still clearly visible.

Suddenly, Jan sees the bright flash of a muzzle flash on the park promenade, and a split second later, a gunshot whips through the night.

*»Turn left and stop away from the island!« yells Jan.*

Another shot cracks, drowning out the loud engine.

*»Duck down! Make yourselves as small as you can! And try to drive in a serpentine fashion, David!«*

The boat, which is already bouncing up and down due to the light swell, now performs a wild zigzag dance. A third shot rings out! This time, however, the bang is overlaid by the bursting sound of splintering wood.

*»Damn it!« yells Jan. »We've been hit! David, try to make sharper turns!«*

Actually, Jan would not have thought it possible for the shooter to have a realistic chance of hitting such a small, moving target at this distance. Nevertheless, three more of the following shots hit the boat. Of the total of four projectiles, two penetrate the stern, one the side hull and one misses Jan and David by only a few centimeters, causing the small windshield to shatter into a thousand pieces before their eyes.

At some point, the shooter gives up. But maybe he just ran out of ammunition.

*»Are you all right?« Jan asks his shocked companions when he is sure that there is no more danger.*

Gianna and David just nod silently, still ducking their heads. A little later they reach the jetty in Stresa and Jan moors the punctured boat. While doing so, he ponders how to explain the condition of his beloved gem to the boat rental man tomorrow. During the walk to the hotel, there is an icy silence for the first few minutes. Finally Jan says:

*»I warned you that it could be dangerous over there. But you really wanted to come along!«*

*Gianna retorts, »This is the second time in a short time that I have been shot at!«*

She doesn't mention that her friend Salvatore had to lose his life the first time and that she now thanks heaven that David didn't get anything today.

*Jan says: »I will alert my colleagues in Cologne tonight and take further steps. This count on the Isola Bella can experience something! But now the colleagues from the Po domain should take care of it and make this madman harmless.«*

*»What can we do now?« David wants to know.*

*»I'm starting to get the feeling that we're in over our heads. But I would like to evaluate the photos I took on the island with you*

*tomorrow morning! Maybe they will give us some new clues. Also, I have an idea who else we might be able to bring in as a consultant on this matter.«*

## **Spreadsheet analysis**

Gianna, David and Jan are sitting in the stylish breakfast room with a few other early risers from the Grand Hotel. From the small loudspeakers in the corners of the room, softly rippling piano music can be heard. Suddenly, the gentle background music is abruptly interrupted by the angry shouting of a man rushing in:

*»Where isse this son of German whore? I'll finish him off!« yells Renato Barcarini with a red head.*

When he went to check on his boat this morning, he was almost struck by the blow. At his mooring on the jetty, he had only found an unprofessionally roped submarine. In the course of the night, so much water had penetrated through the bullet holes that the boat had finally filled up and sunk. With great effort and the active support of his colleagues, he managed to pull the boat ashore and examine it in more detail. But this wreck, with which until yesterday he had been able to ferry rich tourists to the islands of Lake Maggiore, reminded him of the pitiful remains of the pirate boats he had taken under machine-gun fire during his active naval service in the Adriatic.

For half an hour, a heated debate rages in the breakfast room between Jan Eckert, Renato Barcarini, the breakfast waiter, the concierge, the barista, and Gianna. David stays out of the discussion and concentrates instead on the excellent breakfast. Only after being promised a lavish advance payment, Barcarini finally believes Jan's assurances that the Office of Collateral Damage will pay for the damage incurred and reimburse all provable costs without red tape. Snorting loudly, he pockets Jan's advance and is then escorted out by the concierge.

After the end of this exciting breakfast, Jan asks his companions to come to his suite for a briefing. There he tells them about his nightly



observations at the palace and about the illustrious group of pensioners who gathered there yesterday.

*»I have a memory card here with the photos I took on Isola Bella. David, can you scan them with your computer?«*

David slides the chip into the card reader of his notebook and opens the first file.

*»What is that supposed to be?« He asks, shaking his head, when he sees the blurred photo of the mountain landscape projected onto the screen.*

*»I don't know! They were looking at a whole series of such landscape shots there last night. But what might be interesting are the last shots. I took those before the guard spotted me.«*

David continues to scroll to the last image file and says:

*»The last three photos all show some sort of data table! Pretty blurry if you ask me, unfortunately.«*

*»Can you zoom in there a little closer so you can read what that says?«*

*»Hmm - I can zoom in and out. But I don't think it's going to do much good. What could that mean? Darkroom? Christ? Freedom? Zooming in doesn't make it really legible, either. You shouldn't have wiggled it like that!«*

*"Ha, ha! You take a photo with a steady hand when you're about to be discovered by the enemy. So you mean the text is unreadable in all three photos?«*

*»That's probably how it looks - but wait a minute! Maybe there's something there after all!«*

David opens a special image editing program that he had installed once on a trial basis in one of his last projects. He starts the File Open dialog and reads in the three blurred image files. Then he presses the "Sharpen" button and says:

*»Voilà! I think now you can read it!«*

*»Brilliant!« Jan exclaims enthusiastically. »Now how did you manage that again?«*

*»Well, this software combines the image information contained in the three blurred images and calculates a new overall image from it, which can be displayed much sharper in total than in the original formats. Actually works quite well - doesn't it?«*

Together they stare spellbound at the table, which is now clearly legible, but none of the three can make sense of it right away:

Darkness	Christoph	Friedrich
Drought	Augustin	Henri
Blood	Napoleon	Joseph
Flood	Amor	Werner
Plague	Claudia	Hugo

*»Lots of names,« Gianna says. »Although – Amor reminds me on Cupid, the God of love, and Napoleon was a famous general and emperor. What does that mean?«*

*»The left column reminds me of the Bible plagues,« David says.*

*»You mean the ten plagues from the Old Testament,« Jan replies, »but as far as I know, the Great Flood has nothing to do with the ten plagues.«*

He goes to his bedside table and picks up the hotel Bible lying inside. After a quick glance at the table of contents, he begins to read aloud from the Book of Genesis:

*The Lord then said to Noah, »Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for*

*forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made.«*

Gianna and David look at Jan with wide eyes.

*»So?« asks Gianna. »What's that supposed to tell us now?«*

Jan shrugs his shoulders in perplexity and answers:

*»No idea! I'll send this data table and the other pictures to my colleagues in Cologne. Maybe our analysts in the back office will figure it out.«*

*»And in the meantime, we'll spend a few nice days on Lake Maggiore!« David suggests. »You said yourself that we can't do anything for the time being.«*

*»You would probably like it that way! To take a vacation at my employer's expense! But I'm sorry to disappoint you. It's over for both of you now. The professionals will take care of the rest now.«*

Gianna and David's bitter disappointment is plain to see. The prospect of a few days' vacation in this grand hotel was just too tempting.

*»Does that mean we're going home again?« Gianna asks sadly.*

*»No - not yet! While we're in the area, I'd like to take the opportunity to ask an old acquaintance for advice. As you know, my colleagues and I have had a well-founded suspicion for some time that we are dealing with a large-scale conspiracy against the domain system. My acquaintance is a proven expert when it comes to domain systems established around the world.«*

*»Oh, come on!« David grumbles uncomprehendingly. »Are you telling me that we now have to visit your old history or geography teacher who is squandering his pension here on Lake Maggiore?«*

*»Just off the mark,« Jan grins, »both in terms of the place and the person. My acquaintance has not retired on Lake Maggiore, but in the Aosta Valley. So we still have a good two-hour drive ahead of us. And the schoolteacher thing doesn't quite hit the mark*

*either. Does the name Karl Guggenmoser mean anything to you?«*

*»The inventor of the domain system?« Gianna and David exclaim as if from the same mouth, looking at Jan in disbelief.*

*»That's the one! I did my doctorate at his chair many years ago as a student. As far as I know, he has been living quite secluded in Valpelline for several years. But I have no idea how he is doing and whether he is interested in seeing me. I suggest we meet again here in my suite in an hour. Maybe I'll know more by then.«*

## **Coffee talk**

Ten minutes before the appointed time, David and Gianna come rushing into Jan's suite.

*»I've received a new tracking signal!« David exclaims excitedly.*

*»And now guess when and from where!«*

Jan just stands at the window and pulls back the curtain again when the young couple enters.

*»Well tell me. I'm an agent, not a visionary.«*

*»Last night! And the cell phone was still on Isola Bella. Here look!«*

David holds the opened notebook in front of Jan's nose.

*»If you can trust the bearing, our man was standing on the southern tip of the island yesterday and that was shortly after the shots were fired at us. Do you know what that means?«*

*»That our killer tried to murder you for the second time!« Jan answers dryly. »Knowingly or unknowingly.«*

*»Rather unknowingly, I would say. How was he supposed to know I was in the boat?«*

*»Now all the authorities have to do is arrest him!«, says Gianna.*

*»If he's still on the island now, which I highly doubt,« Jan counters, »By the way, have you looked out your window?«*

*»No why?« asks David.*

*»Why do I have to pay for such an expensive suite with a view of the lake? If you would take a look over to the island, you could see what my colleagues from the Po domain are doing right now. One police boat after another! I'm assuming they've sent a special task force over there and they're now turning over every rock on the island.«*

*»I can't wait to hear who they meet there,« Gianna says. »Will your colleagues keep you updated on the progress of the investigation?«*

*»For sure! But I honestly don't expect that much from this action. If our target turned on his cell phone after the shooting, it certainly wasn't to wish his girlfriend good night. I'm sure he was trying to warn his accomplices that the police are on their way. With all these doddering old men around, it must have been clear to him that an orderly retreat could not happen so quickly and that there was no time to lose. But anyway, we'll find out soon enough what comes of this police operation on the island. I just got off the phone with my former professor and announced our coming. Get your things together! We're about to leave.«*

Fifteen minutes later, the three are standing at the hotel reception ready to leave, and after another quarter of an hour they are already sitting in Jan's DKW X8 and driving along the highway in the direction of Milan. »Stupid speed limit!« Jan thinks to himself, while the cruise control keeps the speedometer needle at a constant 130 kilometers per hour. On their journey through the Rhine domain, they had often driven twice as fast. A speed limit is discussed there from time to time, but thanks to successful lobbying on the part of Porsche and Mercedes, concrete measures are certainly not to be expected any time soon. People in the Po domain seem to take a more relaxed approach to life, and that includes a more leisurely

driving speed. »What the heck,« Jan thinks, »there's no reason to rush at the moment anyway.«

The further they drive, the flatter the foothills of the southern Alps become. Behind Gattinara, the endless expanse of the Po Valley welcomes them. But the ride through the flat land is only a brief intermezzo before they are entering the grandiose alpine world of the Aosta Valley behind Ivrea. They cross the Dora Baltea River and follow its course upstream for a long time. Until they leave the highway at Aosta, the capital of the DoraBaltea.Po domain, and turn off in the direction of the small mountain community of Valpelline. In front of a neat chalet in the valley of the Buthier, the familiar navi voice announces:

*»You have reached your destination!«*

Jan's hands are clammy as he presses the bell button, next to which the faded name "Guggenmoser" can be read. When was the last time he saw his professor? Face to face, probably at the presentation of his doctorate certificate. That was in another life, so long ago now. After that, of course, the forefather of the domain system was often to be admired on television. He was a welcome guest on all talk shows, always guaranteeing good entertainment and high ratings.

*»What do you want? The professor is not available for anyone!«  
a young woman snaps at them in an unfriendly manner.*

Her hard Eastern European accent immediately reveals that she is not a local. She scowls at the three troublemakers at her front door. Jan doesn't know what to say at first, when a faint voice sounds from inside the house:

*»Ludmilla, it's all right. Ask my guests to come in, please!«*

The nurse's facial expression changes from openly aggressive to unkindly annoyed.

*»Come in, but kick your feet off!« she grumbles unwillingly as she goes ahead.*

As they enter the quaint wood-paneled living room, the professor comes rolling toward them. Jan is involuntarily startled when he recognizes his former doctoral advisor in the frail old man. What has become of the proud, strong man? Hunched and powerless he sits in his high-tech wheelchair. His scrawny legs bear witness to the fact that he has not been able to use them for quite some time. The few remaining hairs on his pale head are white as a sheet and the wrinkles on his face are innumerable. Only the white rows of teeth in his smiling mouth appear flawless. And the sparkle in his eyes suggests that behind this worn facade, a lively spirit is still doing its work.

*»Hello Jan! I'm glad to see you again after such a long time! You look great! A real man has become of you!«*

*»Greetings, my dear professor! The pleasure is all mine!«*

Jan thinks hard about how he can halfway return the old man's compliments without having to lie shamelessly. Instead, he introduces him to Gianna and David before he quickly and directly gets to the actual reason for his presence. But Guggenmoser stops him first and turns to his nurse:

*»Ludmilla, would you be so kind as to fetch us a few pieces of cake from the village? It's already coffee time and we don't want our guests to starve. Besides, I could also use a little refreshment.»*

And addressing Jan and his young companions, he adds:

*»You must know that I just returned tonight from a lecture in Milan. You were lucky in that you reached me by phone this morning.«*

The nurse sighs, but then goes on her way. Guggenmoser rolls up to a large table next to the fireplace and asks his guests to take a seat on the comfortable corner bench. Jan tells him in detail everything he knows about the previous bombings and his fear that the incidents so far could be part of a large-scale conspiracy against the domain systems. Professor

Guggenmoser frowns as Jan shows him the ominous table on his tablet computer.

*»Darkness - Christoph - Friedrich,« the professor repeats after deciphering the first line with the magnifying glass. »Maybe Darkness is a code for an attack target and Christoph and Friedrich are the executing terrorists!«*

*»Then each attack would be carried out by two different assassins,« Jan replies, shaking his head in disbelief. »Besides - what terrorist's first name is Amor or Napoleon?«*

*»They could also be pseudonyms,« Guggenmoser teaches him. »Such criminals certainly don't work under their real names. However, I don't think it's very likely that so many people are involved. Usually, the number of confidants is kept as low as possible in such cases.«*

*»So far, we also only have concrete evidence of a single assassin. We have a photo of him when he was caught in a radar trap near Immendingen shortly before the attack on the Danube sinkholes. At that time he was traveling under the false name of Igor Popov.«*

Jan shows Professor Guggenmoser the blurred flash box photo and then continues to browse through the image files stored on his notebook:

*»I took this picture last night on Isola Bella. This man turning his back on us here could be the gunman who took fire at us as we were fleeing the island. I suspect that this is also this so-called Igor Popov. In any case, he understands a lot about explosives, as David will be happy to confirm.«*

David nods eagerly and asks the professor politely:

*»Do any of the other people in this photo look familiar to you?«*

Guggenmoser looks at him somewhat reproachfully and then says somewhat disconcertingly:



*»Young man, you think that just because some of the gentlemen in the photo are about my age, I should know them? Well - I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you.«*

Gianna is a little ashamed of her friend's unseemly behavior, but continues to look suspiciously at the facial expressions of the old man, whom she had imagined to be so very different. Meanwhile, the professor turns back to his former student and asks him:

*»Could you please show me that data table again?«*

Jan swipes across the display of the tablet computer until the table appears.

*»Darkness - Darkness,« Guggenmoser repeats with strain.*

Then a glow flits across his old face.

*»A year ago, there was a bomb attack on the power line near here at the Gotthard Pass. The large pylon at the top of the pass was brought down, and Airolo and the communities to the south of it were left in the dark for days. There were even deaths because in some hospitals the emergency power supply did not work properly!«*

*»Why do you think there might be a possible connection here to the other attacks?« Jan asks, visibly alarmed.*

*»Well, because of the watershed! The destroyed power pole stood exactly on the main watershed of the Alps - between the Po and Rhine domains. There was an endless dispute afterwards as to who was responsible for repairing the pylon and the destroyed power lines. The sufferers were the inhabitants of the affected Alpine valleys, who wished to return to the times when the Gotthard line was still under the control of the Swiss power companies.«*

David nods his head and searches the internet with his notebook for the ten biblical plagues. Shortly after, he begins to read aloud:

*»Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that*

*can be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days.«*

*»That could certainly fit,« Jan says thoughtfully. »But then what's the deal with Christoph and Friedrich?«*

*»Check out when men of that name have their name day!« suggests Guggenmoser.*

*»You mean the names could be a code for the day of the attack?«*

While the professor nods silently, David starts hacking away at his notebook again.

*»There was a St. Frederick of Utrecht, whose name day is celebrated on July 18, and St. Christopher, the Christ-bearer, whose commemoration day falls on July 24.«*

*»And when did this assassination attempt on the power line take place?« Gianna asks curiously.*

*»Wait a minute I'll check,« David answers, clicking through some news portals. »That was on June 13 last year. On this day celebrate their name day - one moment - here I have it: Antonius, Bernhard and Randolf«.*

*»Hmm - that was nothing then!« Jan sighs in disappointment. »Then we're back to square one again!«*

The four rack their brains for a while as to what information this data table might contain or whether they might even be chasing a phantom. Until Ludmilla arrives with the cake, puts a pot of coffee on the stove, and finally joins the assembled group for a coffee klatsch.

*»A beautiful spot you've chosen here!« Jan says to his old professor while looking out of the large south-facing window. »I could really imagine living here!«*

*»Well,« replies Guggenmoser, »I bought this chalet at a bargain price over twenty years ago. Back then, tourism here was still at*

*rock bottom and the locals were happy for any newcomer who brought them some money into the valley. For me, it was the ideal retreat to relax from the stress of university. At that time I was also still physically fit. You can go on wonderful hikes here. You must have seen the wild little stream of the Buthier, which flows right down there in front of my chalet. For miles you can walk through this beautiful valley, all the way to the lake up there and the nice rifugio, on its shore. And from there, you can really go for it in the high mountains. We are in the immediate vicinity of the Matterhorn here. Most people think of the Matterhorn only in terms of Zermatt and the Rhone domain. But that's the cold north side over there. Here, on the other hand, we are on the sunny side of this infinitely beautiful mountain landscape. And the southern sun is the only thing I can still enjoy today.«*

The old professor falls silent and it is easy to see how much he would like to bring back the past times. But before he gets melancholy, he changes the subject and asks:

*»So what are your plans, Jan?«*

*»I think we'll spend the night in Aosta tonight and head back home tomorrow. At the moment, I don't see that we could do anything else here. But I will confer with my office in Cologne tonight at the hotel. Perhaps by then there will be news concerning the events on Isola Bella. In my profession, one is never immune to surprises!«*

Jan chats a bit more about his agent activities for the Foreign Ministry and Professor Guggenmoser repeatedly demonstrates his great knowledge and enormous quick wit. When the conversation turns to their joint study trip to the Shatt al-Arab domain, Jan wonders what details this old man still has present in his mind that he himself had long forgotten. After two hours, Guggenmoser's nurse interrupts the conversation:

*»Professor, don't you think you should get some rest now? You had a short night and little sleep!«*

Guggenmoser immediately begins to vehemently object to this interference in his affairs. Jan, however, has not failed to notice that the professor's eyelids are becoming increasingly heavy. He thanks him for the interesting conversation, expresses his pleasure at the reunion and gives the signal to leave.

When they are back in the car and have programmed the address of a hotel in Aosta into the navigation system, Gianna speaks up from the back seat:

*»Tell me, I can't help myself. Don't you agree that this professor could be one of the men who were at the palace on Isola Bella yesterday? I think he looks a lot like one of those wheelers from behind!«*

*»What nonsense!«* scolds Jan. *»You'd better think about what you're saying before you make such accusations. I'd put my hand in the fire for Guggenmoser!«*

David also agrees with Jan:

*»Really! Old men in wheelchairs all look the same from behind!«*

*»Maybe so,«* Gianna replies, a little unsettled, *»but there's definitely a certain resemblance. And besides, he said that he arrived here again last night. Maybe he wasn't in Milan at all, as he claims, but with the Count on Isola Bella!«*

Jan shakes his head in annoyance at the abstruse theories of this precocious Roman chick.

*»I think that's completely absurd! But if it makes you feel better, we can have it checked out.«*

## **Amorous tête-à-tête**

*»In my hotel room in five minutes!«* suggests Jan after they check in.

The navigation system has led them right into the center of Aosta, the old Roman town on the course of the Dora Baltea River. Thousands of years ago, travelers stayed here before setting out on the dangerous journey over

the high passes of the Little or Great Saint Bernard. It is said that Saint Bernard sought refuge here in the town when they wanted to marry him to a woman against his will. In Aosta, Bernard of Menthon chose instead to live the celibate priestly life and founded two hospices on the neighboring Alpine passes, which over the years saved the lives of countless pilgrims and travelers. The large St. Bernard dogs that are bred in the hospice at the top of the Great Saint Bernard pass also bear his name.

Gianna and David have just enough time to stow their luggage in the room and freshen up briefly. Then they go over to the neighboring room to Jan, who is already waiting for them there.

*»Is there a new location?« he wants to know from David.*

*»Just a moment - I'll go and have a look,« he replies, flipping open his notebook.*

*»Why can't your miracle software actually send an automatic notification to your cell phone when our target has logged into the network? Then we would always be up to date much faster.«*

*»It's possible,« says David, »but then I'd have to give my cell phone number to this illegal service provider. And that would be the last thing I would do. But if you want, I can put your cell phone number in!«*

*»Are you crazy? If you do that, you're in for a treat!«*

*»See! So I guess we'll have to continue to manually query the data from the Darknet on a regular basis,« David replies and then suddenly looks at the display, spellbound. »We have a new position! Our man logged on an hour ago at the port of Trieste. Since then, the cell phone has stayed on! You can see exactly how he's moving through the city from the port!«*

David zooms the map larger until you can see the detailed map of downtown Trieste.

*»He's been in a house on Via di Romagna for fifteen minutes. If I interpret it correctly, this is even the house number.«*

While David enthusiastically points to the display of his computer, Jan sprints to the small desk next to the balcony door to fetch a piece of paper and a pen. He hastily notes down the address and says:

*»There's no time to lose now! I'm going to set up a conference call with my office right now and make sure this guy is finally apprehended. You two can do whatever you want until then. I expect to be busy for an hour. After that, I'll let you know if and how things are going with you two. I'll keep your notebook with me for the time being. It could be that our target changes his whereabouts again in the meantime.«*

David protests most vehemently when he hears that he should leave his personal computer logged in. Jan's reaction, however, leaves no doubt that any further discussion about this is completely pointless. In the end, David resigns himself to the inevitable, especially since he doesn't trust this old geezer to have much technical understanding anyway, and the automatic screen saver will ensure the security of his personal data again after just a few minutes.

Frustrated, David goes with Gianna to the room next door while Jan sets about establishing a secure communications link to Cologne. When Gianna enters the spacious suite, she turns off the air conditioning and opens the window to the piazza. She'll never get used to these newfangled chillers. The greatest heat of the day is over anyway. From the narrow streets of the old town, a pleasant, warm breeze flows up into the room on the second floor. It carries with it the aromatic scent of a neighboring espresso bar. The warmth, the smells and the lively Italian voices on the street awaken native feelings in Gianna. She takes off her shoes and pants and relaxes on the soft bed. When she closes her eyes, she has the feeling for a moment that she is back home in Trastevere. David does the same and also falls backwards onto the wide bed.

*»I think Jan wants to get rid of us as soon as possible,« David says while staring at the ceiling.*

*»This arrogant snob could be a little more grateful. After all, I saved his ass yesterday on the island!«*

*»Without my tracking system, he would be blind as a bat. Now he's probably telling his boss how great he is and that he figured it all out on his own!«*

*»Yes, that would look like him. I certainly didn't imagine this excursion to be like this! He treats us like little children: Be good now for an hour! Daddy will be back soon to take care of you!«*

David turns his head to the side and examines Gianna. A picture for the gods! Eyes tightly closed, lips formed into a childish pout, at the foot of the bed she fidgets slightly nervously with her feet, their red-painted toenails contrasting harshly with her long, white legs. David's eyes wander from her toes over her knees to her never-ending naked thighs. These are only covered by her thin summer blouse at the pubic region, so he can't exactly see if she's wearing panties underneath. »One hour,« David thinks to himself and is suddenly not at all angry with the agent from next door for the imposed forced break. He really has no objection to a little lovemaking in the hotel now. While his eyes scan the exciting contours of Gianna's heavily breathing upper body, he feels himself slowly getting an erection. Carefully he turns in her direction, slides his hand under her blouse and whispers:

*»I can think of ways to pass the time!«*

Gianna is rudely startled out of her thoughts and looks unkindly at David.

*»No thanks! I really don't feel like it right now!«*

Then she quickly slips back into her pants and shoes, grabs David's camera and says:

*»I'm going to take a look at the city. Maybe I'll find an interesting subject for my report. I'll be back in an hour.«*

Then she leaves the hotel room, leaving David alone, unsatisfied in every way.

Meanwhile, in the next room, Jan is brought up to date on the current state of the investigation by his colleagues in Cologne. Once again, he has to listen to his superior's reproaches for putting two civilians' lives in danger during his action on Isola Bella. In addition, his boss reports a complaint from the collateral damage regulation office. The clerk there had been insulted for half the day by a Signore Barcarini from Stresa and had threatened to quit her job if something like that happened again. After an hour, none of the conference participants has anything new to report and Jan clicks on the red "Exit" button. He considers whether he should tell David and Gianna about the interesting news right away, but then decides otherwise for the time being. He dials Kevin's cell phone number and reaches him at home. Jan is glad to be able to exchange a few personal words with his life partner after all the exciting days. In the end, however, the conversation turns back to business and Jan lets Kevin explain to him how he can get David's computer under his control. After half an hour, Jan apologizes to his friend that he unfortunately has to end the phone call because he still has a lot to do today and time is pressing. A minute later, Jan knocks on the neighboring door in the hotel hallway.

*»Took longer than an hour after all!« David greets him unkindly.*

*»I thought you would be happy to have a little time to yourselves!« Jan answers as he enters. »Please pack your things, we are going to Trieste!«*

*»Now?« David asks, horrified. »I thought we were going to spend the night here!«*

*»It turned out differently. We're leaving right away. Trieste isn't exactly the closest route. It'll probably be midnight by the time we get there.«*

*»Gianna's not here yet!«*

*»What? Where the hell is the madam again? I told you we'd meet in an hour!«*



*»She's out on the town with her camera, and she wanted to do something for her report.«*

*»Well, this is getting too stupid for me now!« scolds Jan. »Write her a note and leave it at the reception. You and I are leaving now.«*

*»I'm not leaving without Gianna!« replies David firmly.*

*»Fine - then you stay here, too. But I'm taking your computer with me. It's confiscated as of now!«*

*»I don't think it will be of much use to you. Don't think I'm going to tell you my password!«*

*»You don't need to!« grins Jan. »I just got off the phone with an acquaintance who told me how to access your system's backdoor<sup>57</sup>. Works perfectly!«*

*»You can't do that!« David angrily yells at him.*

He is about to go for Jan's throat, but quickly remembers that his opponent is physically superior:

*»I'm going to complain. You bet I will!«*

*»Do what you can't help doing,« Jan replies, shrugging his shoulders calmly. »I really would have liked to have had you there. But if you don't want to ...«*

Fortunately, at that moment Gianna comes back from her walk in the city.

*»Finally!« Jan moans and rolls his eyes. »Get ready, please. We're leaving the hotel in five minutes and going to Trieste!«*

*»To Trieste? Now?«*

*»In five minutes. There is interesting news! I'll tell you everything during the ride.«*

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57 Backdoor: Deliberately created security hole that allows intelligence agencies to gain access to a computer.

Gianna is just as surprised as her boyfriend when she learns of Jan's new plans. But when she looks into David's resigned eyes, she knows that resistance is futile.

## **Good food, good life!**

The receptionist is astonished when his guests, who have just arrived, tell him that they intend to leave again.

*»He says this is not a transient hotel!« Gianna briefly sums up his Italian rant.*

But the man behind the reception desk quickly falls silent again, when Jan uses his credit card to pay the full price of the overnight stay, including breakfast, and wishes him a good day.

*»Come on, tell us!« Gianna urges impatiently when they are back on the highway.*

*»Take it easy,« Jan replies, earning nasty looks in return. »We still have several hours of driving ahead of us. David, can you please keep the tracking system switched on? In Trieste, they're preparing the access right now, and I'm sure the colleagues on the ground would be very grateful for any additional information.«*

*»Can do, but our killer turned his phone off an hour ago and knowing him, he's not going to turn it back on without a need.«*

Jan doesn't feel like arguing with David for long. But when he sees that David activates the tracking software on his notebook as ordered, he nods with satisfaction and decides not to keep his two companions in suspense any longer:

*»We have new information regarding the identity of this count on Isola Bella!«*

*»Aha!« David jokes, »have your colleagues been reading up on the relevant gossip magazines now?«*

*»Not really! The man is not a count at all, nor is he a nobleman. His name is Urs Grafenberg, he's ninety-one years old, and he used to be quite a big shot in the business world. Does the name Nestlé still mean anything to you?«*

Gianna and David look at each other uncertainly and finally answer Jan's question in the negative. He continues to talk:

*»The Nestlé Group was once the world's largest food company and the largest industrial company in Switzerland before the crash. They made and sold infant formula, coffee, ice cream, and just about everything else remotely related to food and drink. Most recently, they have even traded water rights, making themselves the enemy of many human rights activists. This Mr. Grafenberg actually originally comes from the finance industry and was appointed to the board of the Nestlé corporation just before the crash. Rumor has it that he tried to move large assets of the corporation to safety before they became worthless in the turmoil of the economic disaster.«*

*»Do you want to say that this man is only dubbed a count because his family name sounds so similar in the German translation?«*  
*Gianna asks incredulously.*

*»That's right! Supposedly he had this nickname since childhood. When he bought Isola Bella, the name 'Count' leaked out to the public through some indiscretion. And because the man had little contact with the outside world, the rumor that a real-life count had bought the island soon became a generally accepted fact that no one questioned.«*

*David nods in agreement: »It is somehow obvious that someone who resides in such a palace must be a count, prince or other man of nobility and high birth. I'm not at all surprised that such a rumor is believed by everyone at some point. But is that supposed to mean that he acquired the island from embezzled funds from his work for this thing corporation?«*

*»This will be difficult to prove! The global Nestlé corporation has not existed for a long time. Neither does Switzerland, where it*

*once had its headquarters. The many production sites that once belonged to the corporation are now scattered across all possible domains of the world and no longer maintain business relations with each other. There is no legal successor and no one who could accuse the man today or prove him of any wrongdoing whatsoever.«*

Gianna shakes her head uncomprehendingly and asks:

*»And what does this Mr. Grafenberg have to do with our conspiracy? What did he have to say about the accusations that peaceful boats are being fired at from his island?«*

*»The man refuses to make any statement. His lawyer only succinctly referred to his client's domiciliary rights and emphasized that anyone is authorized to take appropriate steps to defend himself in the event of a trespass. That it came yesterday to a use of force or even the use of firearms, he has of course denied.«*

*»And what about the employees on the island? Was it at least possible to get something out of them?« Gianna asks.*

*»Apart from this Mr. Grafenberg, there are only four permanent residents on Isola Bella, all of whom belong to the palace staff: A butler, a chauffeur, a gardener and a housekeeper. All four claim that they had their day off yesterday and only returned to the island this morning. All of them do not want to know anything about a nightly visit of old men. My colleagues showed me the photos of the four employees during the conference call and I am sure that the two security guards were the gardener and the chauffeur. However, since it was quite dark, we will have a hard time proving this. In the end, it will probably be testimony against testimony.«*

*»How can it be that employees are so protective of their employer?« David wonders. »Do you think they're making a false statement to cover up their boss's dirty dealings?«*

*»The three men are all known to the police and have done some crooked things in their past. The only one who seems to have a*

*clean record is the housekeeper. But she is involved with the butler and obviously does what he tells her. I suspect that our Mr. Grafenberg knows something about each of his employees and can put them under pressure. That's probably why they all stick together like peas and carrots.«*

It gets quiet in the car for a while. A long day is drawing to a close. Gianna and David's eyes fall shut as the car roars quietly along the monotonously straight highway. Jan tries to keep awake with occasional espresso stops. While he holds the steering wheel, his thoughts mostly revolve around this mysterious data table, the secret of which even his colleagues in Cologne have not yet been able to unravel. As they pass Milan, it gets dark.

*»Why does someone who lives on such a tiny island actually need a chauffeur?«* wonders Gianna, who has just finished her nap.

David has already reached the deep sleep phase and continues to snore unperturbed.

*Jan answers: »According to our information, this Mr. Grafenberg does not live as lonely on his island as the people in Stresa believe. There are always phases where he is on the road for weeks and the island is deserted. The chauffeur then not only drives him around in his limousine, but is also something like his personal bodyguard. The gardener, on the other hand, seems to be something more like the caretaker of the entire estate. He couldn't possibly manage the huge parks on his own. There is a whole army of subcontractors around Lake Maggiore who get orders from him and then do the work by the hour that is needed on such a large estate. The upkeep of such an island is certainly not cheap. But this Grafenberg seems to be literally swimming in money. He has been leading a life like God in France for many years and nobody knows exactly how he finances it all.«*

*»How long will they be able to keep this whole gang in police custody, then?«*

*»As far as I know, they are all already at large and back on their island. Mr. Grafenberg's lawyer has pointed out the poor evidence and the advanced age of his client, and his doctor has*

*attested that his health is in very poor condition. In the end, the investigating judge in Milan had no choice but to release them all.*«

Gianna looks out through the side windows in disappointment and watches the landscape fly by, gradually disappearing into the darkness. When she can no longer see anything, her gaze lingers on the navigation system's map. On the colorful display, the scale shown switches back and forth at regular intervals between an overview display and the current detailed map. When the entire route between the Aosta Valley in the west and her destination Trieste in the east is displayed once again, Rome suddenly appears at the bottom of the monitor. The eternal city on the Tiber.

Gianna's hometown. Is that possible? The driving distance to Trieste is about the same as the distance one would have to travel to Rome. What kind of crazy world is she living in? In her head, she revisits the exciting weeks when she was on the road with David from Rome to Genoa. Partly on foot, but mostly by motor. They wanted to get to the north as quickly as possible, and yet they were on the road for weeks. Now she is lounging in the comfortable leather seats of a luxury automobile and is expected to reach her destination relaxed after five hours of driving. Wasn't this boot-shaped figure on this monitor once a single country? Isn't a common language spoken and aren't the same recipes cooked there everywhere? Aren't the same festivals celebrated and the same songs sung? Why are people here wearing expensive brands and not homemade clothes, as she herself did until just a few weeks ago?

Gianna is so absorbed in her thoughts that she doesn't even notice that they pass the first domain borders. Except for a few signs, there is not much left to see of the former border installations. Since the Po, Adige, Piave and a few other small domains have joined together to form the North Adriatic Customs and Monetary Union, there are virtually no border controls at the respective watersheds. Only when the three of them approach the Tagliamento river system behind Portogruaro Jan wakes David, who is still fast asleep, and admonish his co-drivers to keep their identification

documents handy from now on. The border crossing, however, takes place quickly and without any problems. When the customs officers see Jan's diplomatic passport and the documents issued in Vienna by his companions, they boredly wave the car through without further inspection.

*»Welcome home!« Jan shouts as they continue the journey.*

Gianna looks a bit irritated at first, but then says:

*»That's right! I think David once told me that Trieste and its environs were some kind of special economic zone.«*

*»Good attention, my darling!« David praises appreciatively. »As of now, we are back on the territory of the Danube domain. How much further is it to Trieste?«*

*»About an hour,« Jan estimates after glancing at the nav system.*

*»What does your tracking system actually say, David?«*

*»All quiet on the eastern front - our target's cell phone is still turned off.«*

After half an hour, they reach the Gulf of Trieste and recognize the rolling hills of the incipient Karst landscape in the moonlight. Jan picks up his smartphone and begins to scroll through the address book.

*»There's a hands-free function for that kind of thing!« David grumbles, visibly nervous, as he notices that their car is approaching the right guardrail ominously and the lane assist system is taking control.*

*»I'll take a moment to check on the current status of things. Actually, the access in Trieste should have been done by now.«*

Gianna and David give each other a meaningful look that means, »Sure - none of our business, of course!« When Jan has found the right entry, he presses the call button and presses his smartphone to his ear.

*»Hello, this is Jan! We're in Trieste right now. What's the news?«*

David and Gianna watch as their driver is informed by his intelligence colleagues about the events of the past hours. His face darkens more and more, while he acknowledges what he hears at irregular intervals only with a few grumbles:

*»Hmm - hmm - What? - hmm - hmm - Disappeared? - Shit! - hmm - hmm - Dead? - hmm - Shit! - hmm - hmm - Insurance? - hmm - hmm - Explosives! - hmm - hmm - Okay! - hmm - hmm - Okay, see you tomorrow! - Thank you, you too - Bye!«*

Jan ends the call and puts his smartphone in the center console. Then he hits the steering wheel a few times with the flat of his hand.

*»Shit, shit, shit! We're late again!«*

*»Now tell us!« Gianna and David shout almost simultaneously.*

*»The access to the property on Via di Romagna has already taken place two hours ago. But it went thoroughly wrong again. The officers of the flying squad have already come under fire when they arrived, from inside the house. There was a wild shootout in which two policemen were injured. An hour ago, the house was stormed. However, only one person was found: An old man - allegedly the owner of the property. And when the squad tried to overpower him, he was already dead. Probably put a bullet in his own head when he realized that he was trapped. Apart from the dead man, there was no one else on the estate. If our target was actually there, he got away in time. Furthermore, one of the sniffer dogs for explosives is said to have struck the garage. If this is confirmed, it would be another indication that we are on the right track. It's just too bad that this guy slipped through our fingers again!«*

*»Does anyone know any more about the dead owner of this property?« David asks.*

*»Ah yes, I almost forgot. Now brace yourselves! It's another high-ranking top manager from the pre-crash era. Does the name Generali mean anything to you?«*

David rolls his eyes.



*»Is that another fast food saloon like that Nestel company?«*

*»Nonsense! The Generali Group was one of the largest insurance groups in the world before the crash. Trieste seems to have been something of an insurance capital in the first place. All the major insurance companies of note had their headquarters here, or at least an influential branch office. Until the financial crash nuked the entire industry and later allowed it to be completely re-established elsewhere. In any case, the dead old man was a long-time board member of this former Generali group. Do you believe in coincidences?«*

Gianna and David shake their heads in agreement. With the old men who had crossed their path in the past twenty-four hours, a retirement home could be run profitably by now. When Jan turns on the car radio and at the same moment the ancient rapper Bushido begins to warble the song "Forever Young" in a duet with the blessed Karel Gott, he and David almost have a laughing fit. Gianna just looks at her two companions helplessly and doesn't understand at all what's supposed to be so funny about it now. And when the two men start to sing and clap along at the top of their voices, she turns her head to the side window in annoyance and waits until the fit is over.

*»This is really cool!« says Jan, when the song is finally over and he turns the radio off again. »That was a song from my childhood. Really incredible that such a goddamn asshole can make such brilliant music!«*

Then silence reigns in the car again for a while. Only when they leave the highway and approach the sea and the brightly lit center of Trieste on the winding mountain road Jan says:

*»I suggest we find a nice hotel downtown now. I'm dog-tired and there's nothing more we can do today anyway.«*

## **Camping vacation**

Boris Luganov is anything but tired when he reaches the campsite by the lake at the same time. The man at the reception is surprised to see a guest

arriving at such a late hour, but he is happy to be able to rent out one of his empty mobile homes to the man traveling alone at the expensive high season price. Luganov is also happy. At least he doesn't have to pitch his assembly tent and sleep on an air mattress like a pubescent boy scout. It's bad enough that he has to spend the next two nights in this primitive camping facility! Normally, the highest hotel category in the place is just good enough for him. But his plan now requires this sacrifice and when it comes to carrying out his plans, Boris Luganov's capacity for suffering is unlimited.

He parks his van next to his assigned cabin, carries his luggage inside and draws the curtains. Then he gets a glass from the kitchen cupboard and fills it to the brim with vodka. He has really earned it today! Everything went like clockwork. Satisfied, he puts a check mark next to the last of the many entries in his daily calendar: "Check-in at C. Lake".

In the afternoon, he had visited his intermediary in the port of Trieste. An old acquaintance with whom he had already completed many successful projects and whose expertise he had been able to rely on every time. His extensive order had arrived on schedule and complete: The explosives, the detonators, the earth drills and the blasting shells - everything exactly as described on the Darknet and as he had ordered. The used, rotten assembly tent was also part of the delivery. But now, thank God, it can stay in the van until tomorrow morning.

The meeting with the man from the organization had gone off without a hitch. As planned, he was able to store part of the large shipment of explosives at the depot on Via di Romagna and was handed the agreed advance to cover his current expenses.

Luganov begins to carefully check all the items on the delivery bill. Assembling the detonator, which is to be used soon, will certainly take him another hour. He meticulously sorts out the individual electronic components on the table that he will need for the next explosive device. These tiny modules, which can connect themselves to the Internet and

receive their commands from anywhere in the world, are truly a marvel of technology.

But the very best of all, lies small and inconspicuous next to his vodka glass. Luganov takes his brand-new smartphone out of its packaging and slides the enclosed SIM card into the small slot provided. At last, he can use it to download the apps from the darkstore that he needs for the contemporary practice of his profession. Besides, he's had a strange feeling about his current cell phone since yesterday. He had actually just gotten the thing three days ago. Just before he had to make that stupid trip to the Bavarian Forest. Normally, he changes his cell phones every month. But ever since the incident at Isola Bella, he's had the feeling that this device has been compromised. Maybe he's seeing ghosts, but better safe than sorry. And safe in this case means he won't be using this smartphone again!

The Internet connection with the new cell phone works right away. Luganov connects to the darkstore and installs his new bomb app. At startup, he is prompted to create a new user ID. Luganov thinks for a moment and then types in the name of the Bavarian poacher whose life motto he had once made his own during a spa stay in the Schlierach.Mangfall.Inn.Danube domain. He can still remember well how he stood in front of the imposing bronze monument at that time. Engraved on the blunderbuss of the freedom-loving gamekeeper were the three words that had fascinated Luganov so much that he repeated them almost mantra-like during each of his deafening work assignments.

The bomb app asks for a user password for the new identifier. Again, Luganov thinks for a moment and then types in the secure password twice, which certainly can't be found in any dictionary or the usual hacker primers. The app confirms his successful login process and asks him if he wants to start a new project right now. Luganov presses the "Yes" button and conscientiously creates three new detonator objects:

*Blood - Flood - Plague*

»That's easy!« he thinks to himself as he activates one of the ignition modules on the data table. He switches the app to test mode and presses the "blood" button. A second later, the small LED in the ignition module begins to flash. Luganov nods with satisfaction and empties the vodka glass in one go. When it's at its best, you should stop. Tomorrow is another day! But it's still too early to go to bed. He could still take a night bath! After all, the lake is only a stone's throw away from his hut and he should take advantage of this natural idyll while it still exists! Luganov slips into his swimming trunks, gets a towel from the bathroom and leaves his mobile home. From the campsite, a few steps lead down to the small lido, which at this time of day is devoid of people. On his way to the water, he almost runs into a man-sized tin mushroom standing in the middle of the meadow. Grinning devilishly, Luganov marvels at the structure that is becoming so important to him and finally abuses it as a towel holder. Then he jumps into the lake and swims a few laps in the beautiful, crystal clear water.

## Little Berlin

*»Have a great day!« wishes Jan. »Go shopping, visit the city. Take pictures or videos! Gianna - you wanted to make such a nice little movie. This is a great opportunity now, isn't it? Trieste is supposed to be really beautiful.«*

The air is thick in the breakfast room of the Grand Hotel in Piazza Unità. Gianna bites into her salmon roll and answers unkindly:

*»You must be desperate to get rid of us!«*

*»I'm meeting with the head of operations from yesterday's police operation. Do I really need to explain to you that this conversation is subject to absolute secrecy?«*

David shrugs his shoulders calmly. It has long been clear to him that Gianna and he are just a means to an end for Jan. In this case, he can even understand Jan's decision. He knows the need-to-know principle<sup>58</sup> well

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<sup>58</sup> Need-to-know principle: disclosure policy for classified information that grants a person only the access rights he or she needs to perform his or her specific task.

enough from his own day-to-day work. And he also knows that it originated in the world of the secret services.

*»When are we going to meet again?« he asks rather casually.*

*»I think sometime during the afternoon. Please keep your cell phone on so I can reach you at any time. And please check your tracking system regularly. If there is any new location data on our guy, please call me immediately!«*

»Fuck you, too!« David secretly thinks to himself.

Half an hour later, Jan steers the thick SUV up the narrow, steep Via di Romagna. Thanks to the navigation system, he doesn't have to look far and quickly finds the large estate where the failed police raid took place yesterday. Jan is surprised at the strong police presence. Several armored personnel carriers are parked in front of the house, which is riddled with bullet holes. Dozens of police patrol the entire neighborhood with machine guns. One of the men forces him to stop and unfriendly asks him to show his papers. Jan carefully and without frantic movements pulls his diplomatic passport out of his jacket and asks the policeman where he can find Colonnello Forzano. The man checks the document and then reaches for his walkie-talkie. Jan can't understand much of the noisy Italian gibberish. Only the »over and out« at the end of the conversation. The policeman gestures for him to park his car by the fence and then go into the house. But Jan has hardly left the car when a small man in an officer's uniform comes rushing up to him

*»Mr. Eckert?«*

*»Yes, that's me!«*

*»Welcome to Trieste! I'm Ennio Forzano, the operations manager here on site.«*

Jan is amazed at the perfect German of the lively man with the gray three-day beard, who is now advancing with quick steps in the direction of the stately villa.

*»Please come inside. I have just had a video conference with State Secretary Braunweger in Vienna. He told me that you and he were old acquaintances!«*

*»Yes, that's right!« Jan confirms, remembering that it was only four days ago that he had the dubious pleasure of working with this paper-shuffler from the Vienna Foreign Ministry. »Please give him my best regards the next time you see him!«*

*»You can tell him that yourself. I have agreed that I will contact him again as soon as you arrive here. But first I would like to show you something! During the night we have turned the whole estate upside down and made a very interesting discovery. If you would please follow me!«*

The prospect of now having to confer with this paragrapher from Vienna brings Jan's mood down to rock bottom. Braunweger will certainly ask him how he got the address in Via di Romagna, and then it won't be long before he finds out that he recruited David Jonas as an assistant behind his back. A similar situation had already once led to diplomatic entanglements that negatively affected the good relationship between the two great domains for months.

The Colonnello leads Jan into the large entrance area of the house and purposefully heads for the basement stairs. They descend over gleaming marble steps to the basement and enter a wide corridor. The atmosphere down here is already considerably less stately than on the prestigious floor above. In the dim light of a small ceiling lamp, they pass through an open door and reach a large wine cellar. All the side walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves in which hundreds of dusty bottles are stored.

*»I'd like to be locked in this dungeon for a while,« Jan says as he takes a cursory glance at some of the vintages already considered antique.*

Then his eyes fall on the strange wooden door, located in the middle of one of the wine racks, which allows passage to a room behind it.

*»We discovered this secret door tonight!« the operations manager explains to him proudly. »The wine rack can be pushed aside at this point. Behind it, this door then came to light. Watch out! What I'm about to show you, I guarantee you've never seen before!«*

Jan follows Ennio Forzano through the door and is surprised to see another heavily armed guard standing in the room.

*»Who are you actually afraid of that you still use so many officials here?« Jan asks mockingly when he sees Colonnello standing at a spiral staircase leading down. »I thought you had made sure that there were no other people here besides the dead Generali executive!«*

*»That's the way it is,« the police officer replies with a grin, adding, »And we want it to stay so, too.«*

Then he descends the spiral staircase and asks Jan to follow him. Step by step, the two men go down the narrow staircase. The further they get, the more stale and musty the air becomes. When they finally reach the bottom, it takes Jan's breath away. But this is less due to the musty smell than to the endlessly long corridor that suddenly opens up before him in bright neon light.

*»Come with me!« his companion asks him and already advances again with large steps.*

And what now opens up before Jan's eyes is not just one big corridor, but a whole network of long, white, brightly lit corridors.

*»Welcome to Little Berlin!« says the Colonnello as he leads Jan through the unmanageable labyrinth.*

*»What on earth is that?« asks Jan, surprised. »How could they have built this facility without the people up there noticing?«*

*»They noticed that. Only it was quite a while ago! These tunnels are part of a gigantic air-raid shelter built by the Nazis during the Second World War, when they wanted to take control of the*

*entire Adriatic coast from Trieste. These tunnels have been there for more than a hundred years now! After the war they were forgotten for a while. Later they were opened to the public as a museum and you could even take part in guided tours. But that was a long time ago. In the hard years after the economic crash lot of light-shy riffraff cavorted down here. Brutal street gangs found their retreat at this place. The normal population soon no longer dared to go near the entrances to Little Berlin. Therefore, one day the city council decided to put an end to the evil goings-on and had all the entrances bricked up. Since that time, no one has been down here. At least that's what they thought!«*

*»And what does all this have to do with the city of Berlin?«*

*»Well, yes,« the Colonnello replies uncertainly, raising his padded shoulders bearing the insignia of his rank. »I really don't know. Probably because the Nazis built it and it was imagined that Adolf Hitler's bunker in Berlin might have looked something like this. During the war, access to this part of the tunnel system was strictly forbidden to Italians anyway. There is, however, another tunnel system up ahead that was intended to protect Trieste's civilian population.«*

Colonnello Forzano points to the end of the corridor, but there it is bordered by a massive wall.

*»This wall has been newly built! In the old maps it is not yet marked. We assume that the dead Signore had it built when he had the entrance to this part of the bunker uncovered from his villa and prepared for his purposes. He probably wanted to make sure that his treasury could only be reached through his house.«*

*»What do you mean by treasury?« Jan asks, visibly curious.*

*»Come with me! You will be amazed!«*

The Colonnello leads Jan into one of the side corridors. Only now does Jan consciously notice the sturdy wall shelves that stretch along the long tunnel walls. Then he opens his eyes wide.

*»Is that gold?« he asks, startled.*



*»Right! Pure gold! Heavy, solid gold bars! One on top of the other! And not just gold, but silver, platinum and palladium! Precious metals by the ton - just like Fort Knox used to be in its prime! But that's not all! In another passage we found diamonds. Rough diamonds, polished diamonds, valuable single pieces and bulk diamonds by the case. And if that's still not enough for you: Two aisles down, you can admire a respectable collection of paintings. Dozens of works of old and modern masters thought to be lost, which no one has seen since the turmoil of the crash! Our specialists have already begun their investigations. We can only hope that the humid air down here didn't harm them too much! All in all, this down here is one of the greatest treasures ever discovered in human history! Now do you understand why we just got the army up there to secure the site?«*

*»How could a single man accumulate such treasures in the course of his life?« asks Jan, who still can't believe what he sees with his own eyes.*

*»We have a theory about that by now! But let's go back upstairs and discuss it with State Secretary Dr. Braunweger. And oh yes - please keep away from the corridor here in front on the right! That's where our sniffer dogs have been hitting like crazy. We believe that the material in the boxes is explosive. And if it's made of the stuff our experts suspect, an accidental explosion would fundamentally reshape our fair city.«*

## **Group dynamics**

Colonnello Forzano leads Jan into the large dining room on the ground floor. While the director of operations prepares his computer for the conference call, Jan's eyes wander through the bright room. He immediately notices the many photographs on the walls. Almost all of the picture frames have an engraved year at the bottom. Snapshots of the past hundred years are arranged here like a long timeline.

The oldest photo dates back to 1961 and shows a young bride and groom in front of an old tower covered with thick ivy. The bride is wearing a high-necked white dress. Her blond curls are tamed by a veil more bad

than good. With her radiant smile she shows the whole world that this is the most beautiful and happiest day of her life. The groom in a black suit, on the other hand, looks quite serious. Just as if he would look at the coming stage of life with skepticism and suspicion. On the christening photo next to it, three people can already be seen. The bride and groom have now become father and mother. And it seems as if the two have also exchanged facial expressions with this change of roles. While the man beaming with joy presents his progenitor in front of the photographer's lens, his wife stands rather pensively next to him. The usual family photos follow, which are not missing in any family album: Kindergarten, school enrollment, first communion, school graduation, military service and university graduation. The longer Jan looks at the photographs, the more intensively he immerses himself in the life of the strange man in whose dining room he is standing and whose long biography he can vividly reconstruct. A few personal photos with various people follow, which Jan can't place any closer. But then it starts all over again: wedding photos, children's christenings, school enrollments. The protagonist of the wall album has matured into a man, has married and become the father of a bevy of beautiful children. From the year 2000, however, there is a slow but steady change of motifs. Instead of photographically perfectly staged family idylls, other picture contents now increasingly come to the fore: certificates, award ceremonies, work groups, company events, handshakes with politicians. The long photo gallery ends with two brand-new images from the year 2052, one of which shows an old man beaming with joy as he accepts another honorary doctorate during a laudation. And the last shot shows the same tanned man on a golf course somewhere by the sea. Tall palm trees can be seen at the edge of the immaculate green. The photo is reminiscent of the glossy pictures of many a luxurious golf resort. If only the player in the foreground didn't look so frail. As if he needed his golf club more for standing than for teeing off.

*»Hello, State Secretary Dr. Braunweger!« the Colonnello suddenly calls into his notebook, snapping Jan out of his thoughts. »Can you hear and see me?«*

*»Yes, thank you, I can see and hear you fine. Has Mr. Eckert reached you in the meantime?«*

Jan pulls up a chair and takes a seat right next to Colonnello Forzano at the large round dining table. Braunweger's familiar face smiles at him on the display of the notebook.

*»Yes, here I am!« he replies, waving a greeting to the Secretary of State. »Signore Forzano was kind enough to guide me through the tunnel system and show me his sensational find.«*

*»So, what do you say?«*

*»Unbelievable! Simply unbelievable! I mean, how a single man can gather such riches in the course of his life. When you look at this house, you realize that this man hasn't exactly been starving. But if you think about what the stuff down there in the catacombs must be worth! This property here stands in no relation. The man could have afforded hundreds of mansions like this! But don't keep me in suspense! The Colonnello has already hinted that you suspect how the man got hold of this treasure.«*

*»That's right,« replies the State Secretary, and begins to report in detail on the intelligence services' latest findings: »As you already know, the man is a member of the board of the former Generali Group. If our investigations so far are correct, he entrusted with securing the group's assets shortly before the economic catastrophe and saving them through the looming crisis. Although the collapse of the economic and financial system came as quite an unexpected surprise to most people, we can assume that the large financial groups - and Generali was undoubtedly one of them - had a huge information advantage over ordinary small savers and knew exactly what disaster was brewing weeks before the crash. We assume that the man acted on behalf of his employer and switched virtual assets such as shares and government bonds into real assets on a grand scale. Where this gigantic deposit was originally located, we do not know. In any case, the tunnel system in Trieste was still open to the public at the time and was therefore out of the question. However, the exact location of the depot at that time is also irrelevant. What is*

*decisive is that there was only a small circle of initiated people who knew about the existence of this treasure. Probably, they simply wanted to wait out the turmoil of the crisis and return to their old power and greatness after the world economy had recovered.«*

*»Which turned out to be a mistake,« Jan says, shaking his head in disbelief. »Surely Generali fared the same way as all the other multinationals. They were completely broken up and their former components found themselves in completely different domains and forms of government.«*

*»Exactly!« nods Dr. Braunweger in agreement. »And it was the financial groups that were hit particularly hard at the time. While the manufacturing industrial locations were able to participate in the general upswing again after a few years, there was game-over for the financial industry. Only gradually did completely new structures develop on the money market, but they no longer had anything in common with the old financial groups.«*

*»So you mean this former Generali executive was sitting on his treasure and didn't know what to do with it anymore?«*

*»That's right, my dear Mr. Eckert! The years passed and the former Generali board member grew old and mutated into the guardian of the Holy Grail. What else could he have done. The treasure under his house guaranteed him a carefree life until death and if, contrary to expectations, there should one day be a resurrection of his old company, he would have been the great hero.«*

Jan nods in agreement, but then begins to ponder:

*»But what I still don't understand is the connection with our conspiracy story. What does this killer that we've been chasing for weeks now, who's in on this money laundering thing, have to do with this old treasurer?«*

*»You see, my dear Mr. Eckert, our analysts have also racked their brains over this and have come to an interesting thesis tonight! Decisive was this data table which you have photographed on the*

*Isola Bella! As you will surely remember, the table consists of five rows and three columns. In the right column are the five names Friedrich, Henri, Joseph, Werner and Hugo. And what do you think connects these five names?»*

*»Now don't make it so exciting, Braunweger!« Jan answers impatiently.*

*»All five names are very likely to stand for the founders of multinational corporations: Henri Nestlé is the forefather of the Nestlé Group. In 1866 he founded his company and specialized in the production of milk powder. Joseph Morpurgo founded the insurance company 'Assicurazioni Generali Austro-Italiche' in Trieste in 1831, which would later become the multinational Generali Group. For the names Werner and Friedrich we do not have any concrete clues at the moment as far as a direct connection with our conspiracy is concerned. In the meantime, however, we have taken a close look at all the corporations that had an international presence before the big crash. Many of them emerged through a confusing web of takeovers and mergers. However, the names Werner and Friedrich strongly suggest that it could be the former Siemens Group, as well as the former Bayer Group. Werner von Siemens founded a telegraph company in Berlin in 1847, which later became the Siemens Corporation. And Friedrich Bayer founded a dye factory in 1863, which later became the Bayer Corporation. Our specialists are currently feverishly investigating whether the old men photographed on Isola Bella can in any way be assigned to the former management teams of Siemens or Bayer.«*

*»And what about the name Hugo?» asks Jan with a skeptical look.*

*»We puzzled about that for a long time because we couldn't find a group that could be traced back in any way to a company founder named Hugo. Until we finally took a closer look at this Liechtenstein dynasty of princes. Thanks to your help, Mr. Eckert, we now know that the incumbent prince is also involved in this money laundering story in some way. And what do you think we found out? It was a Hugo of Liechtenstein, who was first*

mentioned in documents as bearing this name in the year 1136, believe it or not. After our analysts had put all these pieces of the puzzle together, they came up with the following theory: The Generali Group was certainly not the only large commercial enterprise trying to feather its own nest. There must have been other former top managers like our Generali board member in Trieste. They sat on their sacks of gold and waited for the day when everything would be the same again. Above that, they grew old and gray and fell into oblivion. At some point, they must have reactivated their old connections and realized they had a lot in common. Other retirees would arrange to go bowling or reminisce about long-gone youthful memories. This old ruling elite lamented the bygone days when they were once the 'Masters of the Universe'. We had our psychologists evaluate the situation and they confirmed that we are probably dealing with a special form of senile group dynamics. Old people are known to be particularly prone to idealizing earlier phases of their lives and no longer reflect on them with due objectivity. To make matters worse, the knowledge of imminent death makes things we take for granted, such as fear of criticism or punishment, rather secondary. For an old person who lives out his old age in a nursing home or in the circle of his family, this usually remains without consequences. In our case, however, things are different: We are dealing here with a bunch of borderline-debased old people who have so much money and power that they can basically do whatever they want. And they push each other up within their group, with the goal of restoring the conditions of the good old days. The young prince from Liechtenstein acts as a catalyst in this group: by coordinating the practical execution of these senile fantasies of omnipotence with his youthful verve and high criminal energy.«

»You mean each of the men is a good-natured older gentleman in his own right and only becomes a criminal through the dynamics of the group?«

Here the Colonnello Forzano interferes in the conversation:

»As for the Signore from Generali, I can confirm that! The man has never done anything wrong and was even awarded the

*honorary citizenship medal of the city of Trieste last year. Over the past decades, he has repeatedly donated a lot of money to the city's social institutions and has also made a name for himself as a patron of the arts and business angel<sup>59</sup>. We were all shocked to realize that it was he who had put our people under fire.«*

*»It's easy to be generous with a piggy bank like that in the cellar,« Jan growls, and then asks Dr. Braunweger on the other end of the conference line, »Didn't the man have any relatives who noticed his strange behavior? I've seen some family pictures here in the room showing him surrounded by his loved ones!«*

*The head of operations winks wearily and answers: »The Signore already separated from his entire family in a dispute many years ago. At about the same time that his meteoric career with the Generali Group began, his marriage went down the drain. His wife separated from him and his children didn't want to know anything about him either. After the crash took away his career and his management functions, he fell into a deep hole and apparently concentrated fully on his treasury guardian existence.«*

*»Tragic, tragic,« Jan replies and briefly almost feels something like pity for the old man. But then he quickly suppresses this thought and says, »So that would give us a possible explanation for the right-hand column of the table. But then what do the other entries mean?«*

*»Unfortunately, we don't know that either,« sighs the Secretary of State. But we still believe that the first column could be possible assassination targets. The line assigned to the Generali Group says 'Blood'. We therefore fear the worst!«*

## **Brainstorming**

The video conference with Dr. Braunweger drags on for a long time, but does not provide Jan with any further insights. After a joint lunch with the head of operations, Jan exchanges ideas with his intelligence colleagues in

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<sup>59</sup> Business Angel: Someone who supports a company founder with money, know-how and contacts in return for a share in the company's success.

Cologne. Once again, the conference lasts endlessly, but in the end, his colleagues can't tell him any more than he already knows. In the late afternoon, he says goodbye to Colonnello Forzano and drives back to the hotel.

An hour later, he sits in his room with Gianna and David, and the three of them rack their brains over the now slightly revised spreadsheet:

Darkness	Christoph	Friedrich (Bayer)
Drought	Augustin	Henri (Nestlé)
Blood	Napoleon	Joseph (Generali)
Flood	Amor	Werner (Siemens)
Plague	Claudia	Hugo (Liechtenstein)

*»So you think the right-hand column is some kind of sponsor list for terrorist attacks?« David asks after Jan has brought them up to date on the investigation.*

*»One could say so,« Jan replies, »each of the old men once belonged to the top management of one of these large corporations - if we leave aside the prince from Liechtenstein in his special role. Maybe this data table is just an excerpt from a much longer list! Really too bad that they caught me so quickly on Isola Bella!«*

*»What can we do now?« Gianna wants to know.*

*»Wait and see!« replies Jan, raising his shoulders in perplexity. »I've come to an agreement with my boss that we will start our journey home again tomorrow. As long as our target keeps his cell phone switched off, we can't do anything. Did you at least have a nice day in town?«*

*»Well, went like this,« David answers, and little enthusiasm sounds from his voice.*

*»Why? Trieste has plenty of sights to offer!«*



*»Ask Gianna!«*

*»Did you guys have a fight?«*

*»No,« Gianna waves it off. »David's just a little pissed because I've done so many interviews for my video blog.«*

David rolls his eyes. He had truly imagined a sightseeing tour of Trieste differently. Disgruntled, he sums up the day's itinerary:

*»We were having coffee on the Grand Canal - or whatever the people of Trieste call this measly harbor basin. Afterwards we wanted to go to the real harbor, but there we got caught in a demonstration. From this point on there was no stopping Gianna and she had to conduct one interview after the other.«*

*»Now don't act like that,« Gianna hisses at her friend. »Those were highly interesting discussions I had with people!«*

*»What were the people demonstrating against or for?« asks Jan with feigned interest.*

*»There were actually several demonstration groups, all representing completely different views. But basically it was always about this planned Argonaut pipeline.«*

*»I've heard that name before,« Jan says, suddenly interested to learn more after all. »Where did the name for this project come from again?«*

*»The Argonauts come from Greek mythology. Jason and the golden fleece - you may remember the story. The Argonauts are said to have passed through the Ljubljana.Sava.Danube domain on their long journey and reached the Adriatic Sea through the so-called Adelsberg Gate.<sup>60</sup> The energy providers in the Danube domain have been planning a new crude oil pipeline on exactly this travel route for quite some time. Hence the name Argonaut pipeline!«*

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60 Adelsberg: The former Slovenian Postojna

*»That's right, I remember now!« Jan replies, nodding in agreement. »In this way, they could connect the oil port of Trieste with the Danube domain by the shortest route. And besides, this way you could finally replace the old Transalpine pipeline, which is now quite dilapidated and whose transport capacity has actually been insufficient for a long time.«*

*»That's exactly the point!« confirms Gianna and is pleased that at least one of the men seems to be interested in her work. »This new pipeline is calling up all kinds of opponents and supporters: conservationists who think it is irresponsible to lay an oil pipeline through the holey karst soil. Lobbyists who want to create new investment opportunities and jobs. Employees of the company operating the old pipeline who fear for their jobs. And last but not least, residents of the Tagliamento domain, who fear for their status as a special economic zone.«*

*»They'd be really screwed!« David laughs. »They and the people on the Isonzo are now financially on the drip of the Danube domain and benefit from the fact that the TAL<sup>61</sup> runs through their mini-domains. If this pipeline were to cease to exist, they would suddenly be on their own and have to beg Milan to allow them to join the North Adriatic Customs and Monetary Union.«*

Jan looks at David - and says nothing at first. He feels as if he is experiencing déjà vu again. This time he feels reminded of a discussion with his partner Kevin when it came to the situation on the course of the Upper Danube. There, too, the population was torn as to their domain affiliation. Jan gets up, goes wordlessly to his bedside table and takes the Bible out of the drawer.

*»That bad?« Gianna mocks him. »Is praying the only thing that will help us now?«*

*»Why is there actually a Bible in every hotel room here?« David asks with amusement.*

*»Well, I can ask the Pope when I get back to Rome.«*

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61 TAL: Transalpine Oil Pipeline – Crude oil pipeline running from Trieste to refineries in Vienna and Ingolstadt.

Jan doesn't listen at all to what the two kids are saying. With trembling fingers, he flips through the pages of the Old Testament and begins to read aloud:

*"This is what the LORD says: By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hands I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink and the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.«*

Then he slowly puts the Bible aside and thinks for a few seconds about what he has read.

*»My God, that's it!« he finally shouts, slapping his forehead with the flat of his hand. »They're planning an attack on the pipeline! The oil pipeline runs right through the valleys of the Isonzo and Tagliamento rivers. If this pipeline is blown up in the right place, the lifeline of an entire domain will suddenly turn into a sticky, poisonous, black broth! I need to get on the phone with my office right away.«*

Jan sends Gianna and David next door to their hotel room and discusses for an hour with his boss and Dr. Braunweger. After the end of the spontaneously called conference call, he calls his companions back to him.

*»We will stay in Trieste for the time being! Tomorrow morning a helicopter will arrive from Vienna to observe the pipeline from the air. The operating company of the TAL has been informed and will declare a heightened state of alert. Hopefully we won't be too late again this time!«*

## **Tent camp**

Boris Luganov dismantles the old assembly tent, carries it back to the campsite and stows it in the hold of his van. He had spent the whole afternoon inside this tent, sweating like a pig during his hard work. One thin borehole after another he had drilled into the hard, stony earth of the lakeshore with his earth drill until he had finally installed enough explosive in the immediate vicinity of the pipeline.

Last night he had slept better than he had in a long time. The clear, clean air at the lake, the nightly bath before going to bed and the half bottle of vodka had probably contributed equally. The sun was already high in the sky when he finally found his way out of bed. In the small restaurant of the camping site he took a, for local conditions, extensive breakfast to himself, before he occupied himself the rest of the morning with finding the ideal place for his today's project. Starting from the large tin mushroom at the lido, he used his detailed plans to trace the underground course of the thick crude oil pipeline. It didn't take long for him to discover the poorly visible spot, where he then erected his assembly tent unnoticed. It was a tent of the kind often used by cable construction crews so that they could work inside, undisturbed and protected from wind and weather. Looking at the muddy tent, one could think that generations of hard-working men had already earned their daily bread in it. And that they did this by the sweat of their brow was easy to smell.

Boris Luganov's hard day's work is over for today. All the explosive charges are in place. The ignition modules are hidden inconspicuously. Luganov is considering whether he should already arm the ignition mechanism and thus prepare it for remote triggering via the Internet. But since he does not yet have enough confidence in this novel technology and he will spend the night in the immediate vicinity of the explosive device, he decides against it. Tomorrow is another day. Now off to the lake - to wash off the sweat of the day and his bladder is already pressing hard. And then let the last evening in this wonderful place slowly fade away together with his still half-full vodka bottle.

*»Life can be so beautiful!«*

## **Control flight**

Shortly after sunrise, Jan and David drive to San Dorligo; a small community south of Trieste where the large tank farm and control station of the pipeline is located. Jan had asked David if he could accompany him during the helicopter flight with his notebook. If the mysterious bomb

maker did turn on his cell phone, every second might count. David had immediately said »yes« and was now eagerly anticipating the first helicopter flight of his life. Gianna, on the other hand, had immediately waved him off. And without even being asked by Jan. »I've got something better planned for today,« she had claimed snappishly and mysteriously. But David is sure that her feigned lack of interest is related to her panic about being locked up.

The access road to the TAL operating company's premises is strictly guarded. Jan and David are already expected by Maurizio Torriano, the Chief Security Officer of the oil company. He hands over two visitor badges to his guests and asks them to wear them prominently on their clothing at all times. Then he accompanies them to his car and drives them to the heliport. Once again Jan is surprised how many Triestians speak good German. It must be because German is taught as the first foreign language in schools as a result of being part of the Danube domain, and a lack of knowledge of German is not exactly conducive to a successful career in the city, which is remotely controlled by Vienna.

They don't have to wait long at the heliport, as the helicopter approaches with a loud roar. Jan recognizes the indestructible Messerschmidt MS 145 at first glance. This reliable air cab has already accompanied him countless times on his missions abroad. The design is still based on the old Eurocopters built by Airo-Omnibus - or whatever this aviation company was called back then. The helicopter touches down gently and slowly lets its engine run down. While the rotor blades are still spinning, the door opens and a man jumps out from inside the aircraft.

*»Holy shit!« escapes Jan when he sees Dr. Braunweger running toward him.*

Whose friendly looking face freezes into ice when he sees David Jonas standing next to the secret agent from the Rhine domain.

*»Mr. Eckert, there will be repercussions, I promise you! I was already wondering why I can't reach one of my most important witnesses anywhere!«*

Jan feverishly considers how he can explain David's presence to the Viennese State Secretary as plausibly as possible.

*»Good morning, Mr. Braunweger. I am pleased to have you personally accompany us on our mission today. Mr. Jonas has been kind enough to accompany me as an IT consultant on my journey so far. He has a wide range of expertise and without him and his computer, our search successes so far would not have been possible. When he asked me if he could help me on this trip to Lake Maggiore, I just couldn't say no!«*

*»Don't talk nonsense, Eckert! You know as well as I do that civilians have no business here. Send this young man home immediately!«*

*»I would think twice about that,« Jan tries to placate the upset diplomat from the Vienna Foreign Ministry. »As things stand, we must expect our target to commit another terrorist attack at any moment, and as things stand, Mr. Jonas with his tracking software is the only one who might still allow us to prevent this attack. I can therefore only make an urgent appeal to you: Make an effort and let Mr. Jonas fly with us today. There is enough room in the helicopter for all of us!«*

*»Has he signed it?« Dr. Braunweger asks grumbly and Jan immediately knows what the cunning fox is getting at.*

*»He did!« he replies with a grin, thinking of the signature he had wrung from David and Gianna at the beginning of their tour.*

*»Good,« grumbles the state secretary after a moment's thought. »Then this is on you! And now let's not waste any more time. We should be in the air by now!«*

The four men hurriedly board the helicopter and are handed their helmets by the pilot. The CSO<sup>62</sup>, as a guide who knows the area, sits down right

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62 CSO: Chief Security Officer

next to him without further inquiry. Dr. Braunweger and Jan take the seats in the second row. David is left with the back seat, where he makes himself comfortable with his laptop open.

*»Ready for takeoff?« asks the pilot, as the rotor blades above their heads are already spinning so fast that they can no longer be recognized as such.*

The entire interior of the helicopter shakes and vibrates and without the dampening effect of the helmet, you would no longer be able to understand your own words. However, the integrated media system enables good communication and after all passengers have expressed their readiness for takeoff via the microphone of their headset, the skids detach from the ground and the flying machine rises vertically into the sky like a rocket.

David is thrilled by the effect of gravity, which he has never felt so intensely. His stomach, however, signals less euphoria and seems to consider whether it wouldn't be better to switch to panic mode and shed some ballast. Cautiously, David squints into the seat back pocket in front of his knees and is reassured when he finds two large spit bags inside. But when the helicopter then swings into a more stable flight path, he quickly feels better and looks fascinated at the green karst landscape of the Trieste hinterland gliding by below him.

*»We are now following exactly the course of the pipeline, which runs here in a large arc around the city of Trieste,« explains Maurizio Torriano in a slightly super-teacherly tone. »Down there, the border between Italy and Slovenia once ran. Do you see the marker posts that stand there at regular intervals in the landscape?«*

*»The one with the red hats?« asks Dr. Braunweger. »With the white number on them, that look like oversized mushrooms? Are those like the old border posts?«*

*»Nonsense!« the CSO replies and starts laughing loudly. »These stakes mark the course of the pipeline and, with the unique*

*number on the mushroom head, allow us to immediately determine the exact location in the event of a leak.«*

*»Doesn't that create a big security problem?« Jan asks skeptically. »I mean, these stakes mean that every idiot knows where the pipeline runs!«*

Torriano resolutely shakes his helmeted head and says:

*»A secret route is not practical. Those who have a genuine interest in finding out the exact route will always find a way to do so. In winter, when it has snowed lightly or the ground is covered with hoarfrost, you can sometimes see the route of the pipeline with the naked eye. What do you think, how much heat such a pipeline of one meter diameter gives off to the ground. And the crude oil sometimes comes directly from the belly of a tanker that has brought it to us in Trieste from a hot desert country. No, gentlemen: the course of such a long pipeline can certainly not be kept secret. But if it reassures you: we have some safety precautions that the normal population does not know about and the knowledge of which is not intended for the public.«*

The CSO reminds his companions of their duty of confidentiality and explains some details of the overall security concept, which is quite extensive. He then sketches out a few potential threat scenarios and indicates what suspicious things they should look out for during the course of this control flight. Meanwhile, the helicopter has flown over the Isonzo River and passed the city of Udine.

*»Down there in Reana, you'll see one of the many pumping stations that crude oil passes through on its long journey across the Alps.«*

David is no longer really listening to what the security man up front is saying. He is now more interested in his computer, which is connected to the Internet via his smartphone and on which he regularly checks the status of his tracking software. But no matter how often he checks to see if the potential assassin is showing any signs of life: nothing happens. The monitored cell phone remains offline.



Slowly he gets bored. While his fellow passengers search the course of the pipeline with a wary eye for suspicious people and objects, he can only admire the endless, boring plain around the industrial city of Udine from his back seat. He remembers that a few years ago he had once worked on a project that also involved the routing of pipelines. Not oil pipelines - it was about water pipelines at that time. The waterworks of some city in the Drava.Danube sub-domain had commissioned him to do a security analysis of their network. At that time, he had installed some OPC<sup>63</sup> - software on his notebook and was able to control the entire system of the waterworks from his computer. Temperature sensors, shut-off valves, flow meters - all components of the widely ramified pipeline system were clearly visualized on the display of his computer and could be operated remotely, provided he had sufficient access rights. He wonders if there is a similar system with this pipeline? David searches one of the relevant computer forums for the OPC access node of the TAL operating company.

*»Indeed!« he thinks to himself. »They're still using that totally outdated system. Actually, though, it's no wonder, considering how long this pipeline has been around.«*

He starts the OPC software on his notebook and tries to connect to the access node.

*»That was to be expected: I need an identifier and password.«*

David enters the word "operator" as the identifier and tries the password »tal«:

*»Access denied!« gets as a response from the system.*

*»TAL« - »Access denied!«*

*»TaL« - »Welcome operator!«*

»Those morons!« David thinks to himself and cheers inwardly. How can you secure such a sensitive system so miserably? He considers whether he

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<sup>63</sup> OPC: Open Platforms Communications - Software interfaces for data exchange between applications of different manufacturers in automation technology

should immediately inform the CSO about his discovery. But his curiosity wins out over his need to communicate. Triumphant, he looks at the fascinating image that has just appeared on the display of his notebook. The discovery function of the OPC program is drawing one component after the other into the displayed network. Pressure and temperature sensors, shut-off bulkheads, pump controllers, control station components - David soon has to scroll deep into the topology of the system to be able to recognize any details at all.

Meanwhile, the helicopter has reached the Alps and is flying at unabated speed over a wide riverbed. In a sea of white pebbles, a small meandering stream makes its way.

*»That's the Tagliamento down there!« Maurizio Torriano teaches his flight attendants.*

*»This little trickle is the heart of the main domain?« Jan asks incredulously.*

*»You can come here in the spring after the snow has melted. You'll be surprised what it looks like down there then!«*

And just a few pipeline mushrooms away, the SCO declares:

*»We are now reaching Lake Cavazzo. Just behind the lake is the large pumping station that pushes the oil over the main ridge of the Alps.«*

David, meanwhile, scrolls and zooms around on his computer, trying to match the pipeline's path with the overview image on his computer.

*»So why did they run the pipeline right along this beautiful mountain lake?« Dr. Braunweger wonders. »It's hard to imagine what would happen if a leak were to occur here!«*

*»So far, everything has always gone well,« the safety man replies, shrugging his shoulders. »Besides, the pipeline system is designed in such a way that if there is a drop in pressure, all the pumps downstream of the leak are immediately shut down automatically. If someone were to blow up the pipeline here now,*

*the entire flow of crude oil would come to an immediate halt. Nothing more would come from below – I mean from Trieste - and the oil remaining in the pipeline would be sucked away from above by the upstream pump. The damage would not be insignificant, but it would be manageable.«*

*»Still - just look at that marker post next to the campsite down there!« continues Braunweger. »Right on the water's edge, that thing is! That means the pipeline here is actually below the water level of the lake. I think that's pretty irresponsible.«*

*»Could we please take a closer look at this campsite?« Jan asks the pilot.*

The pilot fulfills his wish and lets the helicopter circle at an altitude of about fifty meters above the campground. After a while, David speaks through his headset:

*»Signore Torriano, I have something on my computer that will interest you!«*

*»Not now David!« Jan responds brusquely. »We need to focus on what's happening down there now!«*

*»It's important though!«*

*»What's so important, young man?« the CSO replies without taking his eyes off the tents and caravans on the ground.*

*»I managed to hack into your OPC system!«*

*»And you're telling me this now? That would be really highly interesting if it were true, but let's discuss it at the end of this control flight, please. All in good time.«*

David falls silent again for a while. But this is not because he has been intimidated by the security guard's reaction. Stunned, he stares at the screen of his computer and doesn't know what to make of it.

*»Signore Torriano,« he begins again after a while. »We have a problem! There's a cronjob on one of your pumps!«*

*»David!« interjects Jan. »This really isn't the time for this computer crap! God knows we have other things to do here than deal with your stupid software problems! Can we please move on now? There's nothing suspicious down there!«*

*»What's a cronjob?« Dr. Braunweger asks as the helicopter turns off and continues north.*

*»A cronjob is used for time-based execution of computer programs. The word chronos comes from the Greek and means time. You can use such a cronjob to automate any tasks so that they are automatically executed at specified times.«*

*»Would you please get to the point!« the Viennese State Secretary impatiently chokes him off.*

*»I can see with my software that such a cronjob is attached to the control unit of a pump. If I interpret this correctly, it is supposed to invert the pump direction in exactly - three minutes!«*

*»That's really enough David!« yells Jan into his microphone.  
»Just because a pump on your computer is acting funny, you're keeping us from our important work? Now shut up or we'll put you down there!«*

In the meantime, the helicopter has reached the end of the lake.

*»Do you see up ahead?« Maurizio Torriano calls out. »There lies the village of Cavazzo. And right down here, in front of us, is the big pumping station.«*

*»Where the big electricity plant is?« asks Dr. Braunweger.*

*»This is not an electricity plant,« explains the CSO. »This is the power supply for the pumping station! What unimaginable amounts of electrical power do you think are needed to push that amount of heavy crude oil over the Alps?«*

For a second there is radio silence. Then it's David again who starts screaming:

*»Oh my God! I now know what that pump is whose direction will reverse in three - sorry two - minutes! That's the big main pump down there in the pump station. I can clearly see it by its device properties. I never thought there were pumps that powerful at all! And the direction reversal thing doesn't end there! After reversing the pumping direction, the pump disconnects from the system and can no longer be controlled from the outside! Do you know what this means, gentlemen? If now somewhere downstream of this pumping station a big leak should occur in the pipeline, the entire contents of the pipeline - from the main ridge of the Alps to this pumping station will flow out! With a pipeline diameter of one meter, that is approximately a thousand liters of crude oil per meter of pipeline. Did you understand? A thousand liters of crude oil for every meter from here to the main ridge of the Alps! If this scenario should occur, an oil avalanche pours through the valley the Tagliamento up to the Adria that even still the inhabitants in Venice will stand up to the ankles in black mud!«*

For a second, there is dead silence in the headsets. Then Maurizio Torriano gets out of his seat and turns around to face David. His face is white as chalk. His eyes reflect pure horror. Barely audible, he begins to stammer:

*»If that should happen - then God have mercy on us!«*

## **Ignition**

Boris Luganov also got up very early today. Shortly before leaving the campsite, he activated the detonator module of the explosive device. Then he said *»Arrivederci«* to the idyllic place in the mountains and got into his van. He followed the small side road that leads around the southern tip of Lake Cavazzo and finally parked his van at a small parking lot on the eastern shore road. There he has been waiting for quite some time now.

From the driver's seat he can overlook the entire lake, which at this early hour lies still and smooth like a mirror in front of him. On the opposite shore, he can make out the few small houses where the campsite and the lido are located. It's a good thing that there aren't so many people out and

about so early in the morning. Maybe the unavoidable collateral damage over there will be kept within reasonable bounds.

Suddenly, the romantic morning silence is abruptly disturbed. A helicopter approaches from the southern end of the lake with a loud roar. The beating of its rotors roars over the lake like machine-gun fire. It seems as if it is now hovering directly above the campsite. What are they looking for? Probably a lost hiker or something equally trivial. Just good that the damn thing didn't show up yesterday when he was setting the charges in his tent! Surely such a helicopter over his head would have made him nervous and who is nervous makes mistakes. But Boris Luganov does not make mistakes!

*»Come on boy, fly a little further over to the right! With a little luck, I'll pull you right out of the sky!«*

To his great disappointment, however, the helicopter now turns away again and flies around the mountain further north. Boris Luganov looks at the gold Rolex on his wrist. Only a few more minutes. Then his friend Pyotr will make his grand entrance. Even if he is very far away at the moment. Even if he's probably lying in bed with some blonde, busty prostitute in St. Petersburg right now and doesn't know which end is up. His friend Pyotr can do something that Boris Luganov cannot do at all: His friend Pyotr knows computers. His friend Pyotr is a hacker by the grace of God. There is no computer network that his friend Pyotr could not get into and manipulate at will and abuse for his own purposes. In many of his jobs, his friend Pyotr had actively supported him. One could almost say that the two of them form a kind of dream team. He - Luganov - is the man on the spot. The doer, the organizer, the head and the iron fist. And his young friend Pyotr pulls the fine digital strings in the background, without which it is simply no longer possible to survive in an increasingly digital world.

Boris Luganov looks at his wristwatch once more. Then he pulls his new smartphone out of the breast pocket of his Hawaiian shirt and starts the new app. Three large red buttons light up for him on the small display.

With a lot of feeling, Luganov presses the top button. »Blood - Are you sure?« the app asks again, just to be on the safe side. Boris Luganov nods his head and mumbles his mantra:

*»Rapidus - Subitus - Tinnitus«*

Then he presses the "Yes" button in confirmation. A second later, a bright flash of lightning explodes on the opposite shore and hurls vast quantities of stones and soil into the air. A brown cloud rises above the lake like a small mushroom cloud. And shortly thereafter, the detonation boom, racing across the lake at the speed of sound, reaches Luganov's listening ears. It takes what feels like an eternity before the echo, which is now reflected by the countless mountains in the area and travels through the neighboring valleys like an endless rolling thunder, finally dies away. In a sublime voice, Boris Luganov speaks to himself:

*»My work is done - Pyotr, now it's your turn!«*

Then he starts the engine of his van and looks for the distance.

## **Environmental disaster**

*»What can we do?« Dr. Braunweger shouts as he looks into the empty eyes of the Chief Security Officer.*

*»I'll see if I can delete the cronjob!« David replies.*

His fingers begin to race across the keyboard and touchpad of his notebook.

*»Shit!« he shouts a little later. I do not have sufficient rights.*

*»The job can only be deleted from the control station!«*

Jan taps the pilot sitting in front of him on the shoulder and asks:

*»Can we make a phone call from the helicopter to the control center in Trieste?«*

*»If you give me the number,« the man at the steering stick replies in a calm tone. He seems to be the only one on board whose pulse is still below one hundred and eighty.*

The CSO fumbles around in his wallet and pulls out a small business card.

*»You must call this number!«*

The pilot handles the huge dashboard for a moment and says:

*»Now read the number out loud!«*

Maurizio Torriano takes a deep breath and then speaks the long number into his microphone. Silence reigns on the line for what feels like an eternity. Then it starts to ring and a second later an unintelligible voice answers.

*»Hello, this is Maurizio Torriano, the Chief Security Officer. To whom am I speaking?«*

The man on the other end of the line repeats his strange name, which sounds neither Italian nor German.

*»Listen. We have a huge problem at the pump station in Cavazzo. Please take a look and see if you can detect any peculiarities in the pump controllers. If there are any cronjobs attached to it or something like that!«*

*»Just a moment, sir, I'll have a look - shit! - What's going on all of a sudden? We've got a massive pressure drop at 587! All the alarm lights are going on here right now. Can we please get back on the phone later?«*

*»No!« the CSO yells as loud as he can. »For God's sake, don't hang up now! This pressure drop is related to the pump problem! If we don't get this cronjob out of the system now, there's going to be a huge disaster here!«*

*»Excuse me, sir! Hell is breaking loose here at the control center right now! I need to locate the leak and stop the oil supply!«*



*»This happens automatically, you idiot! Now you do exactly what I tell you! You now go to the main page on your control station software. Then go to View and open the window for the main pump control. There you click on the pump in Cavazzo. Did you get that?«*

*»Okay - as you command, sir.«*

Meanwhile, David can also see the alarm messages triggered by the pressure drop on his notebook. He calls excitedly into the microphone:

*»The leak must be very close here! And there are only 60 seconds left until the start of the reversal procedure!«*

*»Okay,« the man from the control center reports. »You're right! There's some kind of job attached to the Cavazzo pump. What do you want me to do?«*

*»Put that damn thing out!« Torriano shouts as loud as he can.*

*»Only if you take responsibility for it!«*

*»Of course I'll take responsibility! Delete this fucking cronjob now!«*

*»As you wish, sir! One moment – oh shit, sir! I do not have sufficient rights to remove an existing job. I only have operator rights. But there are supervisor or admin rights required to delete a job!«*

*»Can you log into the system with my ID? Wait! I'll spell out my personal password for you!«*

Maurizio Torriano is tearing his hair out in despair. From behind David shouts:

*»50 seconds to go!«*

*»Sorry sir, your ID has manager privileges. This allows you to prepare new system components, assign tasks, and create bug reports at will. However, due to the incident two years ago,*

*managers have again been stripped of all rights to perform system-critical functions.«*

Torriano immediately knows what the operator means by this. The incident at the time was hushed up just before the public got wind of it.

*»Then call your supervisor! We are in DEVCON1<sup>64</sup>, there must be someone at the control station who knows the subject and has sufficient access rights!«*

*»Forty seconds!« shouts David from the back seat.*

*»I saw Natasha walking around here earlier,« the operator answers hesitantly. »I'll see if I can find her!«*

It becomes quiet on the line. Maurizio Torriano starts to pray. Hopefully the man can find Natasha! Since the last Fit4Futuro program, the composition of the technical staff has been so trimmed for cost efficiency that the CSO sometimes thinks he is surrounded only by idiots. »The main thing is cheap!« his colleagues from management reply every time he complains about the poor training of his people. Natasha from the Don domain - or rather from eastern Ukraine, if you ask her yourself where she comes from - Natasha, at any rate, stands out like a beacon. The young woman is highly intelligent, highly motivated and wants to aim high. Let's see how long he can keep her in the company for this shabby salary.

*»Thirty seconds!« David shouts desperately.*

*»Hello Towarisch, what's up?«*

*»Natasha! Thank God you're here. Listen: we have a job on pump 2 that will empty the entire pipeline from Plöcken Pass to Cavazzo into the lake in half a minute. You have to log in with your ID and delete the job, otherwise we're all screwed!«*

*»Twenty seconds!« David shouts loudly.*

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64 DEVCON: Defense readiness conditions - Military term used to define alert conditions.

*»Cyka blyat!« Natasha curses after a brief analysis of the situation. »I see what you mean! What damn pig has laid this egg in our nest?«*

In the headphones of the helmets, you can hear Natasha's long fingernails clacking across the computer keyboard.

*»10 seconds!« David shouts.*

*»There's a mushroom cloud rising up ahead!« yells Dr. Braunweger.*

*»Make it quick Natasha!« cries the CSO.*

*»5 seconds!«*

Short silence.

*»Done, Towarish. I deleted the fucking thing!«*

*»Thanks Natasha! I owe you one!« Torriano replies and relaxes into his seat. »Now please close all the bulkheads and make sure that no more oil leaks out of 587. And alert all available emergency personnel! They are to erect barriers at the outlet of the lake, that as little oil as possible, flows off into the valley.«*

*»All right, Towarish! Anything else?«*

*»No, not for now. I'll get back to you later. Thanks Natasha!«*

In the meantime, the pilot has flown back to the site of the attack at the lake, where the large mushroom cloud of smoke still hangs like a beacon of death above the heads of the startled camping vacationers. A huge black puddle has already formed on the deserted bathing beach, spreading unceasingly and with increasing speed across the entire lake.

*»We have been lucky in our misfortune!« says the CSO as he observes the unfolding environmental disaster at Lake Cavazzo from above with one laughing and one crying eye.*

## **Crisis meetings**

On the short flight back to Trieste, there is radio silence in the helicopter most of the time. Each of the five men is busy with his own thoughts. In David's case, the tension gives way to a growing euphoria. It is to his credit that the effects of the attack have remained within manageable bounds. He is the hero. He saved the world! David flips open his computer and looks up the oil disasters that have occurred so far in human history. Most of the time, it was some kind of oil tanker that spilled its black cargo into the sea, causing mass deaths in the animal kingdom. After a little calculating, he comes to the conclusion that the amount of crude oil that would have spilled into the lake and valley if the pump had reversed thrust would have been about the same as the amount lost by the tanker Exxon Valdez off Alaska in 1989. At that time, the coastline there was contaminated for a length of 2000 kilometers and hundreds of thousands of seabirds, fish and other animals lost their lives. To this day, the toxic residues have not completely decomposed and continue to poison humans and animals through the food chain. The damages that Exxon was ordered to pay at the time were peanuts compared to the sums that would be due in a similar case today. David is sure that if he were given just one percent of the damage prevented by his intervention as a reward, he would become one of the richest men in the world in one fell swoop.

His musings end abruptly when they arrive at the heliport in Trieste. On the return flight, the pilot had reached the Messerschmidt's maximum cruising speed, which reduced the flight time to just a few minutes, in contrast to the creeping speed of the outward flight. »Finally, solid ground again,« David thinks to himself as he jumps out of the helicopter and follows his fellow passengers to the security officer's car.

Maurizio Torriano makes a brief phone call on his cell phone. Then he asks his companions to get into his car and steers it across the extensive grounds of the TAL operating company until he stops in front of a new, modern-looking administrative building. The lady at the reception examines David, Jan and Dr. Braunweger's visitor badges suspiciously.

And this despite the fact that they are accompanied by the company's top security officer - or perhaps because of this.

Torriano leads his guests into a large foyer. On the sides of the hall are entrances to several meeting rooms. The CSO says to Jan and David:

*»Gentlemen, if you don't mind, I would ask you to take a seat here in the foyer for a moment. Dr. Braunweger and I have a meeting with the management. We would ask you to join us later. There is coffee in the front. Please help yourself!«*

Then he disappears with the Vienna State Secretary into one of the meeting rooms and closes the door behind him. David and Jan go to the coffee machine and get two large cups of cappuccino.

*»Well, what do you think?« asks David. »I wonder if they'll give us a medal.«*

Jan just smiles pityingly at his young assistant agent and replies:

*»Oh David, you have a lot to learn in your life!«*

Then they drop into the soft leather chairs and wait until they too are granted admission to the illustrious conference circle. But the time drags on like chewing gum. From time to time, loud voices can be heard, and it's clear that the atmosphere inside is anything but sunny. It takes an hour before Maurizio Torriano opens the door and apologizes to Jan and David:

*»I'm sorry it took so long now. Now if you would please come in?«*

In addition to Braunweger and the CSO, there are two other men in the modern meeting room. Their formal attire with tie and pinstripe suit easily identifies them as members of the management. After Jan and David have taken their seats at the meeting table, one of them addresses David without much ado and without introducing himself and his colleague:

*»So you are Mr. Jonas! We have heard a lot about you and your heroic deed here in the last hour. I would like to thank you on behalf of my company and all of our employees - for what you*

*have done today for us and all the people of the northern Adriatic!«*

The man looks kindly at David, stands up, walks toward him and reaches out his hand.

*»I wish we had more people like you, who approach their tasks with courage and determination. Again - my heartfelt and sincere thanks!«*

He squeezes David's hand firmly, shakes it twice vigorously, and then returns to his chair. When he has sat down again, his face takes on more serious features and after a short pause he starts talking again:

*»Nevertheless - as sorry as I am: I must point out to you that this conversation never took place here! You must not talk to anyone about what happened today during this helicopter flight. The helicopter flight never took place either!«*

David can't believe what the man is saying. Seeking help, he glances at Dr. Braunweger, who is sitting diagonally opposite him, but his expression is just as petrified as that of the two managing directors. The Secretary of State only nods briefly and confirms:

*»You have already heard correctly, Mr. Jonas. This flight never took place!«*

Meanwhile, the man in pinstripes continues:

*»There was no software problem, no problem with a pump, and no other problem of a technical nature. There can't be such a problem, because our systems are secured against any external attack. Signore Torriano, surely you can confirm that!«*

The CSO first looks a little embarrassed at the tabletop, but then explains in a firm voice:

*»Yes, of course! I have instructed my employees to check all network access points for the use of secure passwords. Therefore, I am sure we have no problems to worry about.«*

*»Jan! Please say something!« David calls out to his neighbor in consternation.*

*»Well,« replies the agent from the Rhine domain and clears his throat briefly to gain some time. »As things stand, this is an internal matter for the Danube domain and its associated special economic zones. Therefore, I see no reason for the Rhine Domain to interfere here. I don't even know what kind of helicopter flight these gentlemen are talking about!«*

David's mouth remains open. Now only the pilot remains as a witness, who is surely still waiting somewhere out there in his machine. But the man is an official in the Vienna Foreign Ministry and certainly enjoys the confidence of the Secretary of State. The pilot would certainly be the last person to violate his employer's instructions.

*»Good!« the manager continues. »So now that we've cleared that up, I'd like to discuss the rest of today's schedule. We're all heading into town together now. A crisis meeting is already taking place at the City Hall. You, Mr. Jonas, are dismissed for the time being. We will be happy to take you with us. The City Hall of Trieste is located in Piazza Unità; right next to your hotel, if I'm informed correctly.«*

*»We came to San Dorligo in our own car,« Jan interjects. »If it's all right with you, Mr. Jonas and I will drive back together. I'll drop Mr. Jonas off at the hotel then and come straight to you at City Hall.«*

*»Just as you like!« replies the pin-striped managing director, thus ending the meeting.*

During the drive back to the hotel, the atmosphere between Jan and David is quite frosty.

*»So you just want to cover up the matter!« David grumbles.*

*»If I may give you some good advice, don't get involved! If you mess with these people, you can only lose! This is three sizes too big for you!«*

*»But surely the public has a right to know what went on today and how irresponsibly some people behaved!«*

*»The public is presented with enough sensational footage via the media. Even if today we could prevent worse: The Tagliamento domain has declared a state of emergency. A terrible natural tragedy is currently taking place at Lake Cavazzo. Do you seriously think anyone wants to hear now that this is all just peanuts?«*

The two men continue to discuss for a while without being able to bring their different views closer together. When Jan parks the car in the underground garage of the Grand Hotel, he says:

*»See you tonight, then! This crisis meeting will probably take forever. If you're still awake, we can talk for a little while. I'll just knock on your door or call you. Otherwise, tomorrow morning at eight at breakfast. And remember, not a single word to Gianna about today's events!«*

Then he hurries upstairs, crosses the busy Piazza dell'Unità and asks the doorman at the Palazzo del Municipio for the direction to the large meeting hall. Quickly he walks up the grand staircase. Before he is allowed in, he must first show the guard his diplomatic passport. Obviously, his name is on the list of people who are allowed to enter. The policeman just nods silently and opens the door for him, saluting.

A lot of people have already gathered in the hall. There are name tags on the tables arranged in a U-shape. A sign in front of an empty chair bears his name. On quiet soles, Jan walks to his seat and sits down. The discussion is already very lively. Jan lets his eyes wander over the many name tags and the faces sitting behind them. Sometimes, in addition to the name, the title or the office title of the respective person can be seen. Jan immediately identifies the political dual leadership of the city of Trieste: The mayor, elected by the people, and the governor, appointed by Vienna. Next to them sit the council leaders of the Tagliamento and Isonzo domains. The company representatives of the TAL operator, already



known to him, sit opposite him on the other side of the room. Two chairs further on, Colonnello Forzano sits and gives him a friendly wink.

*»When can we expect a successful manhunt?« One of the journalists present asks the police chief.*

*»We know that he must be a middle-aged man who was the assailant. According to the campground operator, he spoke with a very hard Eastern European accent.«*

*»Is there a photo of the video surveillance?«*

*»Unfortunately, the campsite webcam is currently streaming only live images to the Internet. Normally, the images are archived for a week. However, due to a hard drive failure, this is not happening at the moment. The owner of the campsite will cooperate in the creation of a photofit picture.«*

*»Photofit picture? Don't make me laugh! Once again, a lot of people will unnecessarily use the police lines because they think they recognize one of their hated neighbors in the drawing! Are there no other clues that can lead to the identity of the man?«*

*»We have an exact description of the vehicle in which the suspected assassin is traveling. And we also have the license plate number of the vehicle. However, this must be evaluated with some caution, because it was the man who entered the number himself on the registration form at the reception and it was not verified.«*

On the other side of the room, a man speaks up:

*»Is it possible to estimate yet how much ecological damage will be caused by this terrible assassination?«*

The manager of the TAL immediately responds to this question:

*»As the operating company, we have of course done everything humanly possible to stop the oil spill as quickly as possible. According to our current knowledge, we assume that about 400,000 liters of crude oil have escaped uncontrolled into the environment. I know that sounds quite a lot at first glance. But we*

*should not forget that on our globe, which is so dependent on crude oil, unavoidable pipeline ruptures occur from time to time. Let's take our North American friends as an example! Whenever such a small amount of oil seeps into their Keystone pipeline<sup>65</sup>, no one crows about it anymore!«*

Unrest arises in the large meeting room. Many of those present shake their heads or begin to grumble loudly. It can't be right that their unique alpine biotope should be compared with the desolate, deserted plains of the American Midwest. Jan leans back and relaxes. He suspects that this event will drag on for a long time.

## **Driver change**

Daniele Bisoni takes a hearty bite of his veggie burger. »You can really eat this stuff,« he thinks to himself as he studies the list of ingredients on the eco-packaging with interest: Pumpkin, flour, water, pepper, salt, nutmeg, pumpkin seeds, canola oil, vegan mayo, mustard, carrots, celery and raspberry jam. Really not bad at all! Definitely he will eat this more often in the near future. When he passed the Marco Donaldo restaurant in his van, he had actually briefly toyed with the idea of buying one of those fat-soaked ground beef burgers. Along with a bag of fries and a cup of brown, sweet soda. But then he conquered his inner temptation and went to the eco-shop on the other side of the street.

His doctor advised him to pay more attention to his health anyway. Stress at work and an unhealthy diet would not exactly be ideal prerequisites for a long, healthy life. And Daniele Bisoni wants to live for a very long time. He wants to see his bambini grow up, enjoy life with his beloved wife, and one day bring his life to a peaceful close in a house by the lake, surrounded by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But the house on the lake exists only in his imagination and to make his dream come true, he still has a lot of work to do.

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<sup>65</sup> Keystone Pipeline: Transports oil from Athabasca oil sands deposits in the Mackenzie Domain to petroleum refineries in the Mississippi Domain.

Daniele Bioni is a carpenter. At the moment he can hardly keep himself busy with orders. Today he was busy all day in faraway Udine and now it still takes him over an hour to get back home. But it's nice here, too! He has often taken a break in this small parking lot. In the midst of nature, between singing birds and the rushing brook, he took his meal. And it is cheap, too. Much cheaper than if he would go to one of those simple restaurants and order the current lunch dish. Not to mention the time advantage - and time is money in his line of work.

It is nice and lonely here. Unless one of the girls is hanging around and waiting for a suitor. But even then, this place admittedly has its charms. Twice he couldn't resist disappearing with one of the girls for half an hour into the windowless cargo compartment of his van. But today there's no one here but him. The parking lot is all his.

»Too soon,« he thinks to himself, when suddenly another car turns into his parking space after all. The driver gives him a friendly wave and then parks at a suitable distance. »Must have some kind of tire problem,« Daniele Bioni thinks to himself as he watches the man rummage around in his trunk and finally begin to fiddle with the wheel spider on the right front tire. »He's definitely not from around here!« thinks Daniele Bioni as he looks at the man's Bermuda shorts and colorful shirt.

*»Can I help you?« he asks the stranger after he has left his van.*

*»That would really be too kind of you! My right front wheel is making funny noises. I suspect the lug nuts are loose, but I'm not sure how around to turn.«*

*»Let me have a go! I'm quite familiar with technical things,« answers the carpenter in gray workman's overalls and takes the wheel cross out of the helpless-looking man's hand.*

He goes to the right front wheel of the car.

*»Hold on - we'll have that in a minute!«*

He checks screw after screw with an expert eye and the strength of his strong arms. But no matter how hard he tries, all the screws are sitting bomb-tight. »What kind of strange accent is that?« he thinks to himself after he has reached the last screw.

If only he would look behind! Behind his back, Boris Luganov is pulling a Russian-made 9 mm pistol out of the open side window of the car and calmly pointing it directly at the back of the head of his helpful roadside assistance. Luganov briefly considers whether decency demands that he thank the driver for tightening the screws. But then he once again listens to his inner voice and decides not to make things unnecessarily difficult for his sympathetic victim.

The shot is barely audible thanks to the silencer and because of the nearby rushing stream. Next, Luganov takes a look at his new vehicle. As he sees the mess in the cargo area and the filthy driver's cab, he is overcome with cold horror and considers whether he should really continue his journey in this junk Fiat. In the end, however, his big heart once again gets the upper hand.

*»I don't want you to die in vain!« he mumbles as he tosses Daniele Bioni's body into the Fiat's large cargo hold.*

Then he takes his explosives boxes, the detonators and his other luggage out of his previous car and continues his journey. He still has many kilometers ahead of him today.

## **Plague**

*»I will drop you off at the main station in Salzburg. From there you can take the train back to Vienna. Then I will continue to Munich, drop off the car and fly back to Cologne.«*

Jan, David and Gianna had had a leisurely breakfast at the Grand Hotel and then checked out. Jan had talked to his boss on the phone. The two agreed that, given the current state of affairs, it would make no sense to stay on site any longer. Around ten o'clock in the morning, the three left

Trieste in the direction of Laibach<sup>66</sup>. The well-developed route through the Karavanke tunnel and the Tauern freeway is the fastest way towards home. Soon after leaving the city, they cross the historic border between the former states of Italy and Slovenia - respectively Yugoslavia or Austria, depending on how far back you leaf through the history books.

*»I know you're not interested,« Gianna begins. »But I'll tell you anyway! I was in this area yesterday. Do you see that signpost up ahead? Lipica - that's where I went by bus yesterday!«*

*»Lipica?« David repeats. »Isn't that where the horses from the Spanish Riding School in Vienna come from?«*

*»Exactly! The famous Lipizzaner horses are bred there. I watched the dressage program, participated in a tour of the stables and took a carriage ride through the beautiful lime and oak forests. You have no idea how beautiful it is there!«*

David remembers well their visit to the Vienna Hofburg, not so long ago. He found the dressage performances with the Lipizzaner stallions quite entertaining. Otherwise, however, he doesn't particularly care for these four-legged friends. Jan has no idea what they are talking about. When someone talks about horses, he inevitably thinks of Rhenish sauerbraten and gets hungry. But since he has often received bitter comments, even outright hatred, by mentioning this reflex, he prefers to keep his mouth shut.

*»We're about to reach the watershed,« he announces, after stoically enduring Gianna's long lecture on Andalusian stallions, breeding lines, levades, courbetts and caprioles<sup>67</sup>. »Then we'll be back in the Danube river system.«*

*»Why of all things does the term cattle plague come into my mind now?« David asks, who is also getting annoyed by Giannas stud farm stories.*

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<sup>66</sup> Laibach: The former Ljubljana - capital of the sub-domain Ljubljana.Sava.Danube

<sup>67</sup> Levade, Courbette and Capriole: Schools above ground - These exercises are mastered by only a few talented stallions

Gianna stops telling in a huff and assumes a pouting posture. Suddenly, however, she jumps up like a jackknife and shouts:

*»David, please turn on your computer and look in the Bible, where something is written about this cattle plague! You know: In this data table with the attack targets the term plague was also included!«*

*»How do you think I just figured that out?« David replies and rolls his eyes.*

But then he opens his notebook, searches for Bible excerpts and begins to read aloud:

*Then the Lord said to Moses, »Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back, the hand of the Lord will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field - on your horses, donkeys and camels and on your cattle, sheep and goats.'"*»«

*»Oh my God!« Gianna screams. »They want to kill the poor horses! The stud is on the watershed, just like the previous attack targets. Jan, we have to do something!«*

*»Bullshit!« Jan retorts. »The watershed is miles away from this Lipica!«*

*»Nevertheless! The guide at the stud farm told us yesterday that there are lots of underground rivers and watercourses here in the Karst. You can argue all you want about where the real watershed runs. That fits right into the thought pattern of these crazy Alzheimer brains.«*

*»But the Bible quote also talks about donkeys, camels, cattle and sheep,« David interjects.*

*»You can't take that literally!« Gianna replies. »After all, only oil and not real blood flowed into the lake yesterday. Besides, where*

*are there still donkeys or camels in significant numbers here in Europe?»*

*»Do you really think our assassin is going to blow up some old crocks?» Jan asks, already somewhat annoyed. »They're scattered all over their pastures and meadows!»*

*»Maybe he doesn't want to kill the animals with a bomb, but by poisoning their food or water!»*

*»The perpetrator profile of our bomber clearly shows that he is a male bomb-making specialist. This guy can build bombs. He has nothing to do with poison. Besides, only women ever kill with poison!»*

*»Who says that all attacks are always carried out by the same assassin? If I remember correctly, the names Hugo and Claudia are in the Plague line of the table! Hugo stands for the prince of Liechtenstein as sponsor of the attack. Probably Claudia is the code name of the assassin who commits the poison attack on the poor horses and foals!»*

*»That sounds too contrived to me!» Jan answers and shakes his head.*

*»David, why don't you say something?» Gianna shouts and rams her elbow into the side of her neighbor in the back seat.*

*»Well, I don't know!» he answers hesitantly. »Even if there were something to it, should we go there now and take a close look at the whole area? And even if you find a hand grenade in a stallion's stall and save his life, some groom is bound to come along afterwards and claim that it was just a horse apple and that his stall is hundred percent safe!»*

Gianna looks at her friend in amazement. Jan also turns around backwards from the steering wheel and gives David an evil look.

*»So what?» Gianna replies. »Nevertheless, I would save the life of the animal! You're such assholes!»*

Disappointed, she slumps back in her seat. A few tears run from her eyes, but she immediately wipes them aside. It is the last sentence she will speak to these stupid machos.

## Highlander

*From the dawn of time we came, moving silently down through the centuries, living many secret lives, struggling to reach the time of the gathering, when the few who remain will battle to the last. No one has ever known we were among you, until now.* <sup>68</sup>

Boris Luganov has finished his work on the dam. He drives back down the steep serpentine road to the town. Once there, he buys a newspaper at the kiosk. In the small deserted bar in the center of town, he orders an espresso, sits down at one of the small tables and begins to study the long article about yesterday's bombing at Lake Cavazzo. The more he reads, the more the blush of anger rises to his face. Finally, in a rage, he hurls the newspaper into the corner and leaves the bar without paying. The barista looks after him with weak knees and doesn't dare say a word.

Luganov goes down to the river. He knows about his temper and that he had better not make a phone call just yet. After a quarter of an hour, however, his blood pressure has returned to normal. He leans against the bridge railing and pulls his new smartphone out of his pocket. He has already entered all his contacts from the organization in the address book. He goes to the "Hugo" entry and dials the Prince's number. It starts to toot on the line - for two minutes - then a friendly voice sounds:

*»The requested participant does not answer!«*

*»Blyat!«*

Luganov can guess why no one answers. His Serene Highness had often enough pointed out that he would not accept calls from persons unknown to him.

*»So be it,« Luganov thinks to himself, »then the old device will have to do!«*



Boris Luganov takes his old cell phone out of his pocket, switches it on, types in the device PIN and waits for it to connect to the network. Then he tries calling again. This time it rings only twice until someone answers:

*»Hello, who is this?«*

*»Hello your highness! It's me - the executor!«*

There is a short silence on the line. Then the prince understands who he has on the other end of the line.

*»Ah - the executor! That you still dare to call here! The Blood action has gone off well completely! How could that happen?«*

*»I am heartbroken, Your Serene Highness. But I have nothing to reproach myself for personally. Our man in St. Petersburg obviously messed up. I, for my part, did everything right!«*

*»Listen up, enforcer! We hired you as the general contractor for this job! If one of your subcontractors messes up, you are still responsible for the overall work. You promised us a veritable environmental disaster and now you've delivered nothing but a ridiculous oil spill! Don't think that we won't claim a reduction!«*

Boris Luganov's blood pressure begins to rise rapidly again. This Pyotr will experience something when he is back in St. Petersburg. This was the last time he worked with this incompetent ignoramus. He's going to bomb him into a thousand pieces, this computer wimp, this digital left-winger, this -

Luganov takes a deep breath. Then he answers in a serious voice:

*»On your side, however, there are supposed to have been problems as well, as far as I am correctly informed! Where are you at the moment anyway?«*

*»I am currently staying in the Scottish Highlands and familiarizing myself a little with my future lands. But that doesn't matter now! Yes - you are unfortunately right: we lost an important member of our organization in Trieste. Joseph fell bravely in battle and his legacy has fallen into the hands of the*

*enemy. But we must not let this upset us! I conferred with Friedrich, Werner and Henri just this morning. Our ranks remain firmly closed and we continue to be unwavering in our goal!«*

*»Do you have news of Henri?«*

*»Henri and his troops returned to their island. Everything is under control there. Don't worry about it! How are the preparations for Flood and Plague going?«*

*»Everything is in the green, Your Highness! So we're going through with this as planned?«*

*»Of course, my dear executor! Bring it to an end! I'll see you in two days in my castle in Vaduz. And make sure you don't screw up again this time! Especially the action Flood is of utmost importance for our organization! If something goes wrong again, we'll have to deduct even more from the agreed fee!«*

*»Don't worry, Your Serene Highness! From now on, everything is guaranteed to go according to plan! Your Highness can fully rely on me!«*

*»I'm glad to hear that! Do you need any more of my valuable time?«*

*»No, your highness. I have no further questions. Oh yes, one more thing: I have a new cell phone number. Just now I tried to call you on my new smartphone, but you didn't answer.«*

*»I saw your call, but I don't take calls from people I don't know. Thank you for pointing that out! I will have my butler update the address book.«*

*»Thank you very much, Your Serene Highness! I wish you much pleasure in faraway Scotland. I will see you the day after tomorrow in Vaduz!«*

*»Take care, my dear executor. I wish you every success!«*

With a face filled with hatred, Boris Luganov presses the "Exit" button on his old phone. Then he switches it off and hurls it in a high arc over the bridge railing into the river. Immediately, it disappears into the raging waters of the Piave. Luganov roars after it with a red head:

*»So, my dear Pyotr, you and all your brood will also end up at the bottom of the Neva! This I swear by the name of Satan!«*

## **Piave**

It is around one o'clock in the afternoon when Jan, David and Gianna reach Villach on their way home.

*»There's a new locator signal!«*

Jan almost wrenches the steering wheel in shock.

*»Where?« he wants to know.*

*»In the valley of the river Piave!«*

*»Where is this Piave?«*

David analyzes the map overlaid in his tracking software for a while and then announces:

*»The Piave flows west of the Tagliamento and empties into the Adriatic at Jesolo. Seems to be an independent small domain of the first degree. Belluno is the domain capital.«*

*»And where exactly did the signal come from?« asks Jan and sets the blinker to pull out into the parking lot ahead of them.*

*»From a little place called Longarone, if I interpret that correctly.«*

Jan lets the car roll out into the parking lot. Then he unfastens his seat belt, reaches for his cell phone and dials a Cologne phone number.

*»It's me, we have a new tracking signal from our man! He is apparently now in the Piave domain.«*

Jan talks on the phone with his superior for a while, without Gianna and David being able to hear what the head of the Rhenish Secret Service has to tell his agent. At the end of the phone call, however, Jan briefly summarizes the result:

*»Guys, the game is going into overtime. We are going to the Piave. My colleagues will inform Dr. Braunweger and the Viennese authorities about the new facts.«*

*»Why don't they just send a flying squad there and finally arrest the pig?« David asks uncomprehendingly.*

*»Unfortunately, this is not as simple as you imagine. The Piave domain belongs to the North Adriatic Customs and Monetary Union. Its relationship with the Rhine and Danube domains is somewhat strained at the moment. And the domain government in Belluno is not exactly famous for its uncomplicated and unbureaucratic cooperation. Of course, the official authorities will be informed as soon as possible. But we don't need to imagine that anything will happen so quickly. We are on our own for the time being!«*

*»And of course, once again, no one asks David and me!« Gianna grumbles from the back seat.*

*»You can get off here if you don't like it! In any case, David and his notebook are going with me to this Longarone now!«*

This ends the discussion for Jan. He types the new destination into the navigation system and starts the engine.

The journey goes across the Alps and turns out to be time-consuming and tough. They lose a lot of time at various road works and are stuck in a traffic jam for over an hour before the border crossing to the Piave domain. Jan thinks about how to make good use of the lost time.

*»Say David, you have such great programs on your computer! Can't we just enter our data table into such a program and your miracle computer will tell us what each table entry means?«*

David laughs and says:

*»You mean I transfer the table into my spreadsheet program and then the software answers all our unanswered questions?«*

*»Yeah, anything like that?«*

*»The answer would probably be 42!«*

Jan also laughs now, but somewhat pained. He, too, knows the old movie "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," in which a gigantic supercomputer, after long calculations, announces this number as the answer to the question of life, the universe and all the rest.

*»So you don't think your computer can help us here.«*

*»Unfortunately, no. Therefore you would need something like artificial intelligence. Research into AI has been going on for decades, but without any groundbreaking advances ever being made. Besides, my small notebook would be completely overwhelmed with something like that. You need completely different computing power, as well as access to all kinds of databases.«*

Jan thinks for a while and then starts a new phone call via the car's hands-free system:

*»Hi Kevin, it's Jan!«*

*»Hello Jan, nice to hear from you again! What's new in Trieste?«*

*»We are no longer in Trieste, we were actually heading back towards home. But now we have received a new tracking signal from our assassin. By the way, in the car with me are Gianna and David. I have switched to loudspeaker.«*

*»Hello Gianna, hello David! I've heard a lot about you guys!«*

David is amazed at how openly and impartially Jan talks to this man. He seems to be well-informed about all his official secrets. Probably a colleague from the Cologne secret service. Gianna, on the other hand, has

a completely different suspicion. She had noticed several times in the past few days that the cool secret agent was behaving strangely towards her. At first, she assumed that he simply thought she was incompetent and stupid. In the meantime, however, she is pretty sure that he generally doesn't care about women. With interest she listens to the rest of the conversation.

*»Kevin, listen: we are still having major problems understanding the data table I told you about. We now know that the first column most likely represents the planned attacks and the right column represents the masterminds behind them. But we still don't have a real idea what the specific attack targets are behind these terms like Flood, Plague or Drought. The word Blood probably stands for yesterday's attack on the pipeline and Darkness for an attack on the power line at the Gotthard Pass, which happened a bit longer ago. But what we don't understand at all is the meaning of the middle column, where such strange names are written, like Christoph, Augustin, Napoleon, Amor and Claudia. We suspect that these could be aliases for the assassins, but according to them Napoleon would have carried out yesterday's attack. However, several witnesses have unanimously confirmed that the man under suspicion spoke with a Russian accent. A Russian and Napoleon? Surely that doesn't go together! Besides, we don't believe there are that many different assassins.«*

*»I know. We already talked about this table two days ago. Unfortunately, I still can't help you. I would have contacted you if I could have thought of anything else clever to say about it.«*

*»I get it! But that's not the reason I'm calling. The point is this: You recently got on the trail of those transfers from the Vatican! Didn't you work there with such an artificial intelligent system?«*

Kevin thinks for a moment and answers:

*»No, these were just normal database queries that led us to the target. It had nothing to do with artificial intelligence. But wait a minute - you've given me an idea: My colleagues in IT forensics are actually working on an AI system like this at the moment. They are involved in a research project with the RTH<sup>69</sup> Aachen. If*

*you want, I'll talk to them and ask them whether they might be able to elicit a few correlations from your table.«*

*»That would be great if you could do that for me!«*

*»All right, I'll get back to you as soon as I know more. But I wouldn't get my hopes up too high if I were you!«*

*»Thanks Kevin! Take care for now!«*

*»You too Jan. Bye!«*

Jan ends the conversation and honks at the car in front of him so that he finally moves forward a bit in the traffic jam.

*»All respect!« says David. »You guys are more IT-savvy than I would have given you credit for! Was that the man who helped you crack the password to my notebook?«*

*»That's right,« Jan replies with a grin. »And you can believe me that I would have had no problem doing that!«*

## **Flood**

It is already late afternoon when the three finally reach Longarone. At the Post Hotel they ask for two rooms.

*»I'm afraid I only have one triple room left, and it faces the street,« says the friendly man at the front desk, who speaks only Italian.*

Jan looks at his fellow travelers, but they obviously don't care anymore.

*»We'll take the room for one night,« he has Gianna translate back.*

They take the elevator to the second floor and move into the room, which is quite small for three people. They were used to different standards in every respect from the Grand Hotel in Trieste.

*»A pretty ugly concrete box, this hotel!« David grumbles as he throws his suitcase onto the right side of the double bed.*

*»I don't like the whole town,« Jan says, making do with the folded-out sofa bed. »Have you seen the town center anywhere?«*

*»No,« David replies. »It reminds me more of a Viennese suburb than a small Italian town. Beautiful is something else!«*

He goes to the window and pulls the curtains aside. They are obviously on the western edge of the wide Piave Valley. Directly below their soundproof window, the busy main road passes by. Shortly behind it lies a wide railroad track. And still further down, over a width of many hundreds of meters, the broad gravel bed of the Piave stretches eastward until it is abruptly bordered on the opposite side of the valley by the towering mountains of the Friulian Dolomites.

*»What is that bright spot up there?« David asks and points to the mountains opposite.*

*»It looks like a rock wall,« Jan says.*

*»No, it's way too smooth and even!«*

*»A dam, perhaps?«*

*»Rather!« David replies and nods.*

He opens the dirty window to get a better view of the mountain side shone by the last rays of the long summer day.

*»That is clearly a dam wall! Like an eagle's nest, it's perched up there in the narrow rocky outcrop!«*

*»It's not very wide, but it's almost endlessly high!«*

*»You mean there's a reservoir up there?«*

*»Do you know of any other use for a dam other than to impound water?« asks Jan. »The greater the difference in height between the top of the dam and the turbine, the greater the electrical energy that can be generated. There's probably a wide mountain valley extending behind this narrow rocky outcrop, with enough*



*room for a large reservoir. Something like that is ideal for hydroelectric power generation.«*

Even as Jan speaks, David's eyes widen in horror. And Jan himself also suddenly realizes what his words mean. He begins to stammer:

*»Oh my God! He's going to blow up the dam!«*

David turns white as a sheet and then says:

*»If there is a lake behind this dam and it pours into the Piave Valley suddenly, then from Longarone down to the Adriatic Sea, not one stone will be left on another! There has never been such a flood before!«*

*»Flood - that's it!« confirms Jan. »That's what the entry in the data table is supposed to mean!«*

*»What can we do?« cries David in despair.*

Jan tries to keep a clear head. He thinks for a moment and commands:

*»You take your computer and come with me! We're going up to that dam and try to prevent the worst from happening.«*

Then he hastily pulls out a piece of paper from his wallet and hands it to Gianna.

*»This is the business card of Dr. Braunweger. See if you can reach him on the cell phone number and tell him that the assassin is going to blow up the dam in Longarone. Tell him to immediately initiate the evacuation of the entire valley! And then dial the emergency number and tell the police that all the residents of Longarone are in acute danger of death. The entire town must be evacuated immediately and all residents should be moved upriver to safety!«*

Jan takes his gun out of his travel bag and checks that he has enough ammunition with him. Then he storms out of the room with David. They leave the elevator to the left and follow the green emergency exit signs to a small stairwell. Taking two steps at a time, they rush down the stairs to the

first floor. When the man at the reception desk sees the two men storming past him, armed with a pistol and a notebook, he is shocked. Jan calls out to him:

*»Please call the police immediately and tell them that the dam is going to break!«*

Then he sprints with David as fast as he can to the parking lot and jumps into the car. In the navigation system, he selects the "Places of interest nearby" section and is offered the Vajont dam as the first destination. With squealing tires, they set off on the journey, which is only seven kilometers long.

Gianna can still hear through the open door how the two men run down the long hotel corridor and then disappear into the stairwell. She closes the room door and goes to the open window. »So this is the dam,« she thinks to herself as she closes the window to keep out the noise and stench from the street. Then she looks at the business card of Dr. Braunweger, who put Jan in her hand. As she tosses the card into the trash can, she speaks to herself:

*»But think I'm a hysterical goat! You men are so stupid!«*

Then she looks at her watch, gets her video camera and leaves the hotel. Such an opportunity will not come again so quickly. With this video, she's sure to make it big!

## **Amor**

Boris Luganov takes a look at the dam wall. Large and mighty, it lies at his feet. The lake dammed up behind it is filled to the brim with clear, turquoise-blue water. Water - as far as the eye can see. Water - the elixir of life for people and all living creatures on this earth. No plant that could bloom and spread without water. No animal that would not be threatened with death by thirst without water. Some plants and animals use the precious wet very sparingly, others less so. Like humans. How much water wastes the daily showering, consumption-oriented northern European

compared to the humble desert nomad in the domainless, arid regions of the earth?

Water is an indispensable commodity in every respect. Wars are fought over access to clean drinking water. Long-lasting, bitter, bloody wars. And to an ever-increasing extent, water is determining the course of national borders. »This world is becoming more and more perverse in its use of this precious resource,« Boris Luganov thinks to himself as he lets his gaze wander over the large dam wall.

The enormous power and energy contained in this chemical compound, which consists of only three atoms, was recognized by people a long time ago. Long before they began experimenting with solar energy, atomic energy, tidal energy, wind energy and other forms of energy, they had already successfully harnessed water energy. Long before the birth of Christ, water mills helped irrigate fields and perform strenuous work. And even in modern times, when people suddenly thought they could make themselves independent of nuclear power and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through renewable energies, they had to realize that the energy generated also had to be stored somehow and that the pumped storage power plants required for this were available or feasible in far too small numbers.

Boris Luganov has always been fascinated by the violence that water is capable of unleashing. With gleaming eyes, he imagines the chain reaction that he will set in motion with a light press of his right thumb: His smartphone app will cause a tiny spark in the ignition module. This tiny spark will detonate the high-powered explosive and tear the thick dam wall into a thousand pieces. And the power of his explosive is, in turn, only a tiny spark compared to the gigantic energy contained in the water masses of this reservoir, which he will unleash in one fell swoop, with devastating effect.

This time everything will work out. This time nothing can go wrong. He can rely on Amor, the god of lovers, aka<sup>70</sup> Cupid. The power of love can move mountains. And love, as we all know, is blind. »A nice thought!« he

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70 aka: also known as

thinks to himself. A plan that was set up a long time ago, finally comes true through the power of love! This time there is no Pyotr to screw things up for him again. You can definitely rely on Cupid!

## **Rally drive**

Jan steps on the gas pedal and gets all the horsepower out of the DKW X8. Traffic on the streets of Longarone is still heavy. As he turns onto the main road, he disregards the stop sign and forces a female driver on the main road to brake hard. Recklessly he squeezes into the resulting gap between the vehicles. He presses the horn and, despite constant oncoming traffic, begins to overtake the cars in front of him. Fortunately, the road proves to be wide enough and the drivers in the oncoming lane instinctively steer to the side of the road so that there is no pile-up. David sits frightened in the passenger seat. He has his notebook on his lap and is holding onto it convulsively. He would prefer to cover his eyes in view of Jan's driving style. With relieve he hears that the voice of the navigation system is now prompting them to turn off. However, no sooner have they left the main road than Jan starts overtaking one car after another again, honking loudly. Shortly before they leave the town, an oncoming van driver becomes aware of the crazy speeder and gets in his way to confront him. Jan has to brake hard to avoid crashing into the sudden obstacle in front of him. When the driver comes running towards him, snorting with rage, Jan grabs his pistol and fires a warning shot into the air through the open side window. He shouts angrily at the man that he should move his vehicle immediately. But the man throws himself to the ground in search of protection and does not move from the spot. Cursing loudly, Jan backs up a little and finally drives around the obstacle.

Now they are leaving Longarone. The long bridge over the river runs dead straight and seems to have no end. The roar of the engine makes the whole valley tremble, and when Jan applies the brakes at the end of the bridge, the speedometer needle has already passed the 200 km/h mark.

The navigation system leads them onto the wide road that runs on the east side of the valley, parallel to the riverbed. The traffic density is much lower here, thank goodness, and after only a short time they have already reached a speed that would make the blood run cold in the veins of any traffic policeman. The speed rush, however, is short-lived. Now the mountain section begins, which leads up into the Vajont valley and thus up to the dam wall. Serpentine after serpentine, Jan whips the car up the mountain, repeatedly overtaking the vehicles that suddenly appear in front of them. The higher they get, the narrower the road becomes. Suddenly, a red traffic light appears in front of them, forcing them to stop. Next to the traffic light is an electronic display on which a counter with large digits counts down continuously.

*»Another 450 seconds?« yells Jan. »You've got to be kidding!«*

Once again, he puts the pedal to the metal and ignores the traffic lights that regulate single-lane traffic through the narrow tunnels on the last stretch before the dam wall. He races uphill through the galleries and tunnels at full speed. Twice a car comes toward them. But fortunately the road is just wide enough for them to pass each other without touching. During the entire mad drive, David keeps glancing at the display of his notebook. But no matter how often he looks at it: There is no new location signal. The cell phone remains offline. The car shoots out of the darkness of the last tunnel into daylight, and Jan and David are blinded by the brightness of the Vajont Valley opening up before them. As Jan's eyes adjust to the sun again, he spots a parking lot. The SUV's wide tires skid across the gravel before the heavy vehicle comes to a stop just before a wooden fence.

*»Leave the computer in the car!« Jan yells and reaches for his gun. »It won't do us any good now!«*

As fast as they can, the two men jump out of the car and run in the direction of the dam wall. However, after only a few meters they stop and remain rooted to the spot. Once again, they have arrived too late!

## **Vajont disaster**

Little Micaela from Longarone is already in bed when an infernal noise begins to roar outside. In the local pubs, the soccer fans are sitting together, celebrating and watching a game: the match between Real Madrid and Glasgow Rangers is being broadcast on television. Suddenly, the TV screens go dark. The masses of water rushing down from the Vajont Valley smash a forty-meter-deep crater into the Piave Valley. A huge wave rushes towards the town and destroys everything. Like the pubs, the church and almost all the other houses in the town, the house of Micaela's parents is also swept by a seventy-meter wall of water and completely destroyed.

When the wave finally drains away after a few minutes, it leaves a swath of devastation. In the end, there will be about 2000 fatalities. The exact number of victims will never be known. Half of the dead will never be found. Some of the corpses are washed away with the tidal wave to the distant Adriatic Sea.

Many hours later, little Micaela is rescued alive from the rubble of her former hometown. Only one of her arms and one of her legs protrude from the piled-up rubble and show her rescuers the way. She is the only survivor of her family. Apart from her, there are only a few people in the village who survive the disaster. Longarone is completely wiped out.

The Longarone flood disaster will go down in the history books as one of the greatest man-made disasters. It occurred on October 9, 1963 - 10:39 pm.

## **History lessons**

David and Jan cannot believe what they are seeing with their own eyes. In front of them, the large dam wall arches from one side of the valley to the other. But wherever they look, there is not a single drop of water here. Let alone a lake. There is not even room up here for a lake! Just a few meters in front of the dam, a green, densely forested mountain rises up, towering

over the top of the dam by many meters. What were the designers of this structure thinking when they placed this monstrosity in the landscape?

Completely irritated, they look around in the immediate vicinity of the parking lot. At the edge of the precipice they see a small chapel. On the way there, they pass an information board. As Jan begins to skim the text and realizes that this is probably an event from the past century, he says to David:

*»Come on, we're on the wrong side of the tracks here. There is definitely no more danger from this dam!«*

Dismayed, they get into their car and drive leisurely back to the hotel in Longarone. The return trip takes a quarter of an hour - three times as long as their senseless hussar ride.

They are already expected at the hotel. The man at the front desk actually listened to Jan and called the police. However, not because Jan had asked him to do so. He had not understood the German words of this obviously insane man at all. But he immediately understood that it could not be normal for two men to leave his hotel in a hurry with a firearm and a stolen notebook in their hands. And of course he immediately alerted the police. When the two officers see Jan and David coming into the hotel and the receptionist nods that they are the two wanted men, the handcuffs click. Jan and David are taken into the police car and brought to the police station. One of the officers speaks German and opens the arrest warrant for them:

*»Armed robbery, fraudulent obtaining of lodging services, unauthorized possession of weapons, coercion, endangering road users, disregarding the right of way in three cases, disregarding the ban on overtaking in twenty cases, disregarding the ban on honking in a very large number of cases, attempted murder, exceeding the speed limit by 160 km/h, running a red light, burglary, vandalism and parking without a parking permit.«*

The police officer has a few more accusations up his sleeve, because a female guest is said to have stayed at the hotel with the two men, who has

not reappeared since and is therefore temporarily missing. The officer therefore has a few more accusations on a piece of paper, which he is keeping to himself as a precaution:

*»Kidnapping, Rape, Hostage Taking, Murder.«*

It takes two hours before Jan and David can leave the holding cell and return to their hotel room. The presentation of Jan's diplomatic passport proves to be far from sufficient. It takes a half-hour phone call between the two foreign ministers of the Rhine and Piave domains to finally get things moving in this diplomatically explosive matter. In the end, the police can be convinced that the Rhenish secret agent has made a tragic mistake and acted in all conscience to prevent harm to the Piave people.

Jan and David are just back in their hotel room when Gianna also comes breezing in the door.

*»Ah, you're back already! How was your trip to the dam?«*

Jan and David look at each other questioningly.

*»Now don't tell me you knew about this all along!« Jan says with a reproachful look.*

*»No, I must admit that the penny didn't drop until you ran out of the room. When I saw the dam wall up there, I remembered that the terrible Vajont disaster took place in Longarone. I knew I had heard the name before, but couldn't place it at first.«*

*»What's this disaster all about?« David wants to know. »We saw an information board at the dam, but we didn't have time to read through it all.«*

*»I just came from the city. I've been trying to find eyewitnesses there, and guess what? I actually did a video interview with an old woman who was a little kid at the time and can still remember the disaster. She told me everything that happened back then. If you want, I can show you the video.«*



*»I'd love to another time,« Jan replies, »but today I'd actually prefer the short version!«*

*»Have it your way,« Gianna replies. »The catastrophe was actually already in the offing after the Second World War. At that time, dams and power plants were being built all over northern Italy to meet the increasing demand for energy. At that time, the Vajont Valley appeared to be an ideal location. This was because a huge water reservoir with a large difference in altitude could be realized with a narrow dam wall. However, the geological peculiarities of the valley were not taken into account. In the past, landslides and rockfalls had repeatedly occurred there. Due to the unstable slopes, the Vajont Valley was completely unsuitable for a water reservoir, and there were also scientific reports that urgently pointed this out. In the end, however, economic interests prevailed and the dam project was pushed through. Shortly after completion, however, disaster struck: A huge rock avalanche broke loose on one of the mountain flanks. The force of the rock masses when they hit the lake was equivalent to the energy of several Hiroshima bombs. The displacement built up a tidal wave more than a hundred meters high that destroyed several villages in the valley, even though they were far above the lake shore. Longarone, however, was the worst hit. The huge wave spilled over the dam wall and leveled Longarone to the ground.«*

*»Do you want to say that the dam withstood the flood wave?« David asks incredulously.*

*»Yes! The dam wall held and was simply washed over by the masses of water. Since the disaster, it has stood up there as a memorial to remind people that the forces of nature are not to be trifled with.«*

*»Now I understand why the whole place looks so new and sterile!« says Jan. »They built that up from scratch! How come I've never heard of this disaster? It must be because I wasn't born then!«*

*»I can't answer that either. At our school, every child learns that to this day! Just like the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.«*

*»Well, you really can't compare that! When the terrorists steered the planes into the Twin Towers, over 3000 people died!«*

*»Oh really? And here? More than 2,000 people lost their lives in the flood disaster. That's not so much less. And over 400 of them were innocent children! Do you know how many children were among the victims of 9/11?«*

*»You can't start counting the number of victims against each other now! "Jan replies reproachfully.*

*"I don't intend to do that at all. I just can't understand why you Germans are always so fixated on the catastrophes in faraway America. For decades you've been vacationing on the Adriatic and barbecuing your fat Teutonic asses in Jesolo without ever giving a second thought to the fact that the remains of the children of Longarone washed up on this beach! We Italians just have a different point of view, whether you want to understand it or not!«*

Gianna can no longer continue talking. Her eyes fill with tears. Had she really just said »We Italians«? She can't remember that this had ever crossed her lips before. She had grown up as a Roman, or Tiberian, and had never made a secret of her origins. Now she realizes that there is another identity slumbering inside her that she has never consciously perceived. Bashfully, she turns to the side so that the two men don't see her crying.

David goes to her and takes her in his arms. He briefly considers whether he should justify himself. For him, this catastrophe is an episode from another time and another world. But then he just keeps his mouth shut and hugs his girlfriend tightly.

Jan stands helplessly by and just feels bad. He too considers whether he should add a few plausible reasons for his ignorance. But then he says:

*»Gianna, I want to apologize for our behavior. I'm sorry for the way we treated you the last two days. Maybe yesterday was just too much for us.«*

And then he blows the whistle on all his secrecy guidelines and tells her in great detail what happened during the helicopter flight at Lake Cavazzo.

## **Artificial intelligence**

Jan, Gianna and David have just returned to their hotel room from breakfast when Jan's cell phone rings:

*»Hello, this is Kevin. I have some news!«*

Jan can hear the excitement in his life partner's voice.

*»Good morning, Kevin! What's going on at such an early hour? Gianna and David are standing next to me right now, by the way. I'm going to put you on speaker.«*

*»Yes, a wonderful good morning to you both too. Listen Jan! Yesterday, I showed your data table to the colleagues from IT forensics. They were a bit skeptical at first whether there was anything they could do, but then they finally entered all the data. The AI system spent the whole night querying databases and evaluating websites. And now imagine! This morning we had confirmation that there is a clear correlation between the first and second table columns!«*

*»Could you please express yourself in a way that a normal person can understand what you are trying to tell us?«*

*»There is a connection between the entries in the first two columns!«*

*»And which one, may I ask?«*

*»Watch out. The first column can be interpreted as being related to bombings reported by news agencies.«*

*»We already know that! This is not a new knowledge! The attack on Lake Cavazzo corresponds to the line with the word Blood.«*

*»Now don't be so impatient! So - this attack took place the day before yesterday. That was on August 15. In the line with the word Blood, in the second column, it says Napoleon. The word*

*Napoleon stands for August 15. This connection comes from the calendar of saints. Saint Napoleon was a martyr who was killed in Alexandria during the Diocletian persecution of Christians around the year 300. Napoleon Bonaparte, by the way, was given this name because he was born on August 15, 1769. This allowed him to celebrate both his birthday and name day on the same day.«*

*»My dear Kevin,« sighs Jan, »tell your artificial brain thank you for this nice historical discourse. The conclusion it drew tonight, however, is unfortunately completely for the birds! We had already discussed this idea with the saints and the commemoration and name days and unfortunately had to discard it again, because it can be clearly refuted!«*

*»No - you just started from the wrong premises!« Kevin protests loudly.*

Jan rolls his eyes and looks helpfully at David, hoping that he will agree with him. But David looks very thoughtful and makes a placating gesture. Jan therefore asks:

*»What kind of false premise are you talking about?«*

*»You have assumed that the attack on the power pole at the Gotthard Pass, corresponds to the line with the word 'Darkness'. Probably because of the power failure that resulted from it and that left the inhabitants of the affected region sitting in the dark for days. This sounds plausible, but it is only a human assumption. In fact, this Gotthard attack is not included in the table at all. It is already too long ago! The table describes a much shorter period!«*

*»What else is there to hide behind Darkness?«*

*»The assassination of the Danube sinkholes! You do remember: The sip holes near Immendingen and the small power station near Fridingen. This attack took place on April 20th of this year and this is the commemoration day of Saint Christopher, or Christoph for short. And this very name is next to the word 'Darkness'!«*

*»What does this bombing have to do with darkness?« asks Jan, who still has doubts about this theory.*

*»What do I know? Maybe because the water flows through dark underground channels at the sinking points before it comes to light again at the Aachtopf. Or because the destruction of the power plant caused a brief power outage. You must not forget that these code words were thought up by people. It is impossible to find out what was going on in their heads with a computer program. Our AI system can only come up with an unimaginably large number of possible hypotheses and filter out the most probable constellation according to the process of elimination.«*

*»And what did your mastermind come up with for the term 'Drought'?«*

*»Jan, you haven't got it yet! This artificial intelligence does not work with these terms like Drought, Blood or Darkness as we do. Rather, it scoured the news archives on the Internet and found that there was a conspicuous accumulation of the terms attack, bomb and assassination. And always on the days that correlate with the name days in the second column!«*

*»But what does Drought stand for now?« asks Jan impatiently.*

*»In the line with the word Drought, the name Augustin is written in the middle column. And there was indeed a certain Augustin Schoeffler from Mittelbronn in Lorraine, who worked as a missionary in Vietnam and died a martyr's death on May 1, 1851. For this he was later canonized and May 1 is his memorial day. And exactly on this day the bombing of the CEL pipeline near Genoa took place! The name Drought was probably chosen by the conspirators because they wanted to virtually dry up the petroleum economy of the Po domain by interrupting the oil supply.«*

Jan's skepticism begins to turn into euphoria. He glances at Gianna and David. Both give their right thumbs up in approval to signal that they think Kevin's conclusions are plausible.

*»That's really good news!« Jan calls into the phone. »So that means we've completely decoded the first three lines of the table! But what about the last two lines? Can your AI wonderbrain say something about that, too?«*

*»Well,« Kevin replies, somewhat hesitantly. »I've got some good news and some bad news for you. Which one do you want to hear first?«*

*»The good one, please!« Jan answers spontaneously.*

*»The good news is that there is indeed both a Saint Amor and a Saint Claudia. Our system was able to calculate a specific impact date for these two names as well from the calendar of saints.«*

*»That's great! Then what's the bad news?«*

*»Actually, there are three bad news! The first is that both days are in the future, so logically there are no news reports about the attacks in the databases yet. The second bad news is that Saint Claudia has her Memorial Day on August 18. And that is tomorrow!«*

*»Oh my God!« exclaims Jan. »Tomorrow already! That'll be the attack with the code name 'Plague'! And we don't have a decent clue yet what could be planned there!«*

*»I know,« Kevin replies meekly. »But it gets worse! Saint Amor founded the Benedictine monastery named after him, Amorbach in the Odenwald, and worked there as abbot until his death on August 17, 767. That was exactly 1285 years ago today. That means: The attack with the code name Flood will take place today!«*

## **Dams**

Immediately after Jan and Kevin finish their phone call, the sensational news spreads like wildfire. Jan informs the Cologne intelligence center, and from there the information spreads across whole Europe. In all

domains, emergency plans are pulled out of the drawers and crisis teams begin to meet.

Even in the small triple room at the Hotel in Longarone, heads are beginning to spin. Where will the assassination take place? How is it still prevent. Jan gets to the heart of the problem:

*»What was the bomber doing here in Longarone?«*

David and Gianna look at him helplessly. Gianna says:

*»Would it be possible, then, to repeat the flood disaster that happened here 88 years ago?«*

David shakes his head.

*»If you had seen what it looks like up there, you wouldn't be asking this. The landslide that triggered the tidal wave back then now fills large parts of the former lake. It's like a dam in front of the dam wall. There's no more danger from up there.«*

*»Or maybe the assassin was just passing through and happened to make a phone call here! Who tells us then, that behind the term Flood such a spectacular catastrophe hides like a dam burst?«*

*»I've thought of that, too,« Jan agrees. »A colleague from the Spree.Havel.Elbe domain told me that during the construction phase of his intelligence headquarters, some joker unscrewed the water taps and flooded the whole building as a result. The damage was enormous and delayed the construction work considerably. Maybe behind this so-called Flood is just such a symbolic act, with the aim of attracting some attention.«*

David shakes his head and says:

*»Jan, your optimism is commendable. But when I look at the last bombing like this: There was so much work and criminal energy behind it! I don't think that the attack that will take place directly afterwards will be harmless. Quite the opposite! I have the impression that the severity of the attacks is increasing each time. Moreover, we do not have the slightest idea where today's attack will take place. So far, the attacks have been carried out in very*

*different places. Even if the assassin was here in Longarone at noon yesterday, he could theoretically carry out an attack on the coastal defense structures on the North Sea tonight. Where should we start looking?«*

The three sit helplessly on their hotel beds and hang their heads. Then Jan's phone rings again. For a short time, he hopes that his colleagues might have already found out something new. But when he answers the call, the chief constable who arrested him yesterday is on the line:

*»Sorry to disturb you so early, Signore Eckert. I have one more question for you.«*

Jan is startled. Just what he needs is for the police to start giving him a hard time. Fortunately, the call turns out to be harmless:

*»Mr. Eckert, I have just gone through the list of your offenses again. But since we didn't have time yesterday to go into all the offenses in detail, I wanted to reassure myself that we haven't made a mistake. It is about the two accusations of burglary and vandalism: these have to do with their stay up at the dam. Am I correct in assuming that you forced your way into the maintenance walkways of the dam there?«*

Jan is a bit irritated for a moment and affirms:

*»No, we weren't! When we arrived at the dam and realized our mistake, we turned around and went back to Longarone.«*

*»Well, if that's the case, then I want to apologize to you! We were informed about this burglary last night and assumed that it was you. But it doesn't matter! It was probably those disaster tourists again. This kind of thing happens here quite often. There is nothing to get in these old corridors anyway. But there was considerable damage to the doors and entrances. But now I know. Thank you very much for this information, Signore Eckert! And sorry again for the disturbance!«*

When Jan finishes the phone call, Gianna and David look at him expectantly.



*»That was the police,« he explains. »There was a break-in at the dam yesterday. Someone forced his way into the old maintenance tunnels in the wall, and the policeman wanted to know if it was us.«*

For a brief moment, silence reigns in the small hotel room. Then David says:

*»Do you also believe what I believe?«*

Gianna nods and answers:

*»Yes - surely it's no coincidence that the break-in at the dam coincides exactly with the presence of our killer in Longarone. I bet it was he who forced his way up there!«*

*»The question is, why?« retorts Jan. »What was he doing in a dam that's almost a hundred years old and now serves only as a memorial?«*

*»I can think of only one reason,« David says. »He was trying or will try to blow up the dam!«*

*»But why?« asks Gianna, shaking her head in disbelief. »This dam is not on any watershed, no one needs it, it's old and dilapidated, there will be no damage if it's blown up, and certainly no flood. What would he intend with a blast?«*

Once again, the three look at each other helplessly. Until the penny drops for Gianna:

*»Of course - that's it! He doesn't want to blow up this dam. He chose it as an object to look at! He wanted to find out what such a structure looks like inside and where its weak points are. Normally, dams are strictly guarded. This one, on the other hand, is relatively easy to access because there is no longer any danger from it. Our man probably only had to pick a primitive security lock and then he could get an accurate picture of the interior structure at his leisure!«*

*»You're right!« exclaims Jan, snapping his fingers. »He wants to blow up a dam and has done some research here on site to find*

*out the best way to do it. Then he's gone on to the actual site of the attack and, with the knowledge he's gained here, is putting his diabolical plan into action!«*

*»Without another tracking signal, how are we ever going to figure out where his destination is? Do you know how many reservoirs there are in the Alps? There must be hundreds!«*

*»We need to narrow down the possible targets,« David suggests. »It's probably a dam of the same design type or year of construction as the dam here!«*

*»Do you know anything about the construction of dams?« Gianna asks incredulously. »And as for the year of construction of the individual walls, I don't think they differ that much either. After all, they mushroomed here after World War II!«*

David gets his notebook and starts researching on the Internet. It doesn't take long before he finds what he was looking for:

*»I have here a list of dams built in the former state of Italy. I think we can limit ourselves to this region because the Swiss and Austrians certainly had different building codes and design guidelines.«*

Then he pauses and says:

*»That's awesome! Guess which is by far the tallest dam on this list?«*

*»Come on, tell me!« Jan urges to hurry. »We don't have time for guessing games!«*

*»The Vajont dam near Longarone! With a height of no less than 262 meters! So we can forget about that one. In second place comes the Alpa Gera dam in the Adda.Po sub-domain. It has a gravity dam 178 meters high.«*

Jan thinks about it and then says:

*»Well, I'm not a civil engineer. But I was once on a field trip to the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. At that time,*

*we learned a lot about dams and dam walls. If I remember correctly, the design of a gravity dam is quite different from an arch dam like the one we have here in the Vajont Valley. If he wanted to blow up this gravity dam, he would have chosen the wrong model here in Longarone. Keep looking!«*

*»Number three is the Speccheri dam in the Adige domain, east of Lake Garda. It is a 157 meters high arch dam built from 1955 to 1958.«*

*»That would fit!« Jan exclaims. »Is this dam still in operation today?«*

*»Yes, it is! The power plant supplies electricity to the city of Verona.«*

*»Then that's a very hot candidate in my eyes! Do you have any more dams in your list?«*

David looks at Jan with pity.

*»Unfortunately, yes! We won't be able to finish there today. Number four is the arch dam at Place Moulin. At 155 meters high, it is almost as high as number three. It is located near the watershed with the Rhone River in the domain of Buthier.DoraBaltea.Po. It was built from 1955 to 1965, so that would fit well too.«*

*»That's right!« Jan replies. »I'm also starting to get the feeling that we can't see the forest for the trees. But wait - what did you say the name of the domain was?«*

*»Buthier.DoraBaltea.Po«*

*»Somewhere I've come across this strange name the other day. I just can't figure out where!«*

*»Wasn't that when we visited your old professor?« asks Gianna. »In the Aosta Valley?«*

*»Right! He lived right next to the Buthier River. They have such funny, French-sounding names everywhere there. Besides,*

*Guggenmoser told us how he used to hike up through the Buthier valley to a lake when he was young. David, can you please show us a map of the area on your computer?«*

David opens his map program and zooms in until the huge lake with the strange name Place Moulin is clearly visible. Jan stares spellbound at the map. His gaze freezes into ice. Suddenly he cries out loudly:

*»They want to murder Professor Guggenmoser! That is what they are up to! It is a massive terrorist attack with symbolic significance. With the professor, they literally wash away the originator of the domain system.«*

*»How perverted is that?« asks David. »To murder an old man, they take the death of countless innocent people?«*

*»You have to get into the mindset of these conspirators! I recently talked to a psychologist about a similar case. What he told me about the successful manipulation of people will be confirmed by every advertising expert: It always runs through unconscious perception mechanisms. We humans tend to associate certain terms or symbols with feelings. Terror generates fear. And fear is one of the strongest negative feelings known to man. With the blowing up of the dam and the death of the professor and many other innocent people, a feeling of sadness and compassion is generated on the surface. In the subconscious, however, something completely different happens: There, the domain system is permanently linked with negative feelings. And this linkage occurs in more people the more spectacular the event is. A good example is the September 11 attacks in New York. The television images of the burning office towers were burned into the minds of millions of people at the time, and there they stirred up an unconscious fear of Islamists that, viewed objectively, could not be justified by anything.«*

*»Well, that's an interesting theory,« David says. »But even if you're right: What can we do? If we go from here to this Valpelline in the Aosta Valley now, we'll be on the road for hours. We'll be late again!«*

*»I will make a phone call to Cologne. They should inform the authorities in Milan and initiate the evacuation of the entire valley, including the city of Aosta. And then I'll call Dr. Braunweger. As far as I know, he is still in Trieste. I tell him to come as soon as possible with his helicopter and fly with us to this dam. With the helicopter, we might still be there in time.«*

Half an hour later, the Messerschmidt is already in the air.

## **Twilight of the Gods**

A short time later, the helicopter arrives in Longarone. While the rotor blades are still whirling the garbage lying around the hotel parking lot through the air, Jan, David and Gianna jump into the rattling monster. A minute later they are already on their way to the Aosta Valley. The renewed presence of David Jonas had not come as a great surprise to Dr.

Braunweger. However, the fact that his alleged fiancée is now also part of the party is all the more so. At the moment, however, he has neither the time nor the inclination for another discussion with the agent from the Rhine.

*»We've been able to identify two more former top managers,« he informs his boarded companions over the helmet communication system as soon as they are airborne. »They are indeed, as suspected, former board members of Siemens and Bayer. The two men have now been put on the wanted list and are being sought across domains.«*

*»Very good!« answers Jan, who is sitting next to him. »And what about the Count of Lake Maggiore?«*

*»Mr. Grafenberg and his servants have now also been arrested by the Milan prosecutor's office. Grafenberg's lawyer has requested incapacitation due to his client's failing health. The old man was therefore transferred to a military hospital and is and there temporarily under arrest.«*

*»What about the Prince of Liechtenstein?«*

*»He is also being sought through Interpol. However, the bird has flown away. He has not been seen in his castle in Vaduz for several days. We assume that he is currently abroad. If he ever sets foot on home soil again, he will be arrested immediately.«*

*»Are there any new leads on the assassin?«*

*»Unfortunately, no. We have been able to find the van, which he used at the campsite. However, it looks like he has changed vehicles in the meantime and is still on the run. We have informed all police stations in the Aosta Valley to be on the lookout for suspicious transport vehicles. However, evacuation operations are underway there and the colleagues will certainly have other things to do than keep an eye out for suspicious vehicles.«*

Gianna and David sit on the back seat of the helicopter and look at the peaks of the Southern Alps passing close below them. David asks:

*»How long will it take us to get to the dam?«*

*»About an hour,« the pilot announces. »I'll fly as fast as possible!«*

The pilot still has fond memories of David. Hacking into the pipeline's control software and defusing the situation at Lake Cavazzo had impressed him greatly. He turns to the young man via his headset:

*»Can't you use your computer again to prevent this dam from being blown up?«*

David has his notebook open on his lap, but only because he has not yet completely given up hope of a new location signal from the assassin.

*»Unfortunately no, I really wouldn't know how!«*

But the question doesn't give him any peace, and after some back-and-forth thinking, he suddenly has a glimmer of hope. He searches the darknet for suppliers of ignition devices. The variety of offers overwhelms him and after a few minutes he is immersed in the world of blasters, tunnel drillers, miners, dynamite fishermen and suicide bombers.

Meanwhile, Dr. Braunweger informs Jan about the status of the evacuation measures.

*»I just got off the phone with the crisis team in Milan. The evacuation of the city of Aosta and the entire Buthier Valley has begun. The population is called to take shelter. The professor and his nurse were picked up by helicopter and taken to a secret, safe place.«*

*»What is being done to secure the dam?«*

*»The military has been put in a state of defense and a mountain fighter company is already on its way to the dam. In addition, a large police contingent is being sent there. If the assassin is still near the dam, he is trapped. From Valpelline, there is only one road leading up to the dam. Up there, at the latest, it ends at the Rifugio<sup>71</sup>. If you continue on foot, you inevitably end up in the high mountains.«*

*»Then we can only pray that we are not too late again this time. If he has already planted the explosive device and detonates it by remote or timed detonation, God help us!«*

*»You have to think positively, Mr. Eckert!« says the State Secretary, and you can hear the nervousness in his voice.*

*»Always think positive!«*

The helicopter has already left Lake Como and Lake Lugano behind and is now flying over the wide Lake Maggiore. From her seat, Gianna can clearly see the Borromean Islands, on whose most famous islet, Isola Bella, the adventures of the past few days had begun. »I hope we get out of this one in one piece,« she thinks to herself as the helicopter flies steadily westward. The glaciers and snow-covered peaks of the Monte Rosa massif already appear in front of them. Like a monstrous boundary stone, the mighty Dufourspitze marks both the course of the watershed and the southern border of the German-speaking area. The first side valleys of the Aosta Valley are quickly crossed. Shortly after, the helicopter is heading for an imposing rock pyramid.

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<sup>71</sup> Rifugio: Italian for mountain hut

*»That's the Matterhorn on the right in front of us,« the pilot announces. »All we have to do now is cross this mountain range - then we're there!«*

And indeed - as soon as it has flown over the watershed, the helicopter dives into the valley of the Buthier. In front of them lies the huge, turquoise-colored reservoir, which nestles between the steep mountain flanks right up to the dam wall. The helicopter goes down, rumbles over the roof of the rifugio at the end of the lake, and then speeds toward the dam wall just a few meters above the smooth surface of the water. As he flies over the top of the wall, the pilot abruptly pulls the machine up and initiates a sharp turn to the right. The passengers feel sick to their stomachs. This is partly due to the effects of gravity, but also to the sight that confronts them: The dam wall - a truly monumental landmark of human engineering that has no equal. As high as Cologne Cathedral, as long as seven soccer fields and as old as Bruce Willis - this is how the Place Moulin dam lies peacefully before them. While the pilot looks for a suitable landing site, all the passengers stare spellbound at this gigantic concrete arch sculpted by human hands.

All - except one: David has been immersed in the depths of the darknet for ten minutes and is no longer aware of his real surroundings. He found a thread in the user forum of an ignition module manufacturer that won't let him go. A forum member named "Jennerwein"<sup>72</sup> has been regularly asking newbie questions there lately, and in the process has been ranting around with Russian swear words. The administrator has already reprimanded him and reminded him of forum netiquette<sup>73</sup>. Could this "Jennerwein" be the assassin? The Russian origin could fit. And this cloud-based remote control of ignition modules would certainly be a wonderful solution for a professional bomb maker.

The pilot gently sets the Messerschmidt down in the large parking area above the dam wall and stops the engines. Jan pulls his Walther PPK from the shoulder holster, loads it through and puts it back secured. While the

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<sup>72</sup> Georg Jennerwein: Famous Bavarian poacher from the domain Schlierach.Mangfall.Inn.Danube

<sup>73</sup> Netiquette: A portmanteau of net and etiquette - Describes rules of conduct in Internet communication.



rotor blades are still slowly coming to a stop, Braunweger, Jan and Gianna jump out into the open. From up here, they can see the entire lake, including the dam. The area seems deserted. Only at the end of the place are two police vehicles. The three run there as fast as they can and are met by two police officers.

*»Where are the other emergency services?« Dr. Braunweger asks, out of breath. »And where is the military?«*

One of the officers briefly introduces himself as Commissario Montalbano of the Aosta Criminal Investigation Department and answers:

*»The soldiers have just left the barracks. We expect them up here in about an hour. And the police are concentrating on evacuating the population. My assistant and I were the first on the scene up here.«*

*»What about the other police car?« asks Jan, shaking his head in disbelief.*

*»The colleagues are from the police station in Valpelline. They arrived here ten minutes ago. I don't understand what went wrong here either. I just got off the phone with my department, so that they step on the toes of the crisis team in Milan and finally send enough people here!«*

*»What is the current situation?« Braunweger asks, visibly nervous.*

*»There is no sign of an assassin. However, we found two bodies. The patrolman said that one of the dead men was an employee of the power company He works regularly up here at the dam and is from Bionaz. The man leaves behind a wife and two small children.«*

*»And the other dead man?« asks Jan.*

*»I don't know,« the commissario replies, shrugging his shoulders. »We spotted him up ahead at the edge of the parking lot. He's wearing gray workman's overalls, so we thought he was a worker from the power company as well. But the two patrolmen said they*

*had never seen him around here before. From the looks of it, both men were shot at close range with a nine-millimeter weapon. Do you want to take a look at the dead?»*

*»Later!« replies Jan, growing impatient. »We have to find the assassin or the explosive device as quickly as possible now! Have you already been down to the wall?»*

*»Yes! Someone obviously gained forced access to the tunnels inside the wall. At the entrance to the gallery, we found the body of the power plant employee.«*

*»Have you already been inside the tunnel?»*

*»No, I think the access is buried. We didn't get any further there. The two colleagues have made their way to the other side of the dam and want to see what it looks like over there.«*

*»Please take us downstairs to this entrance!« Jan asks the Commissario. And turning to Gianna, he asks, »Where the hell is David, anyway?»*

She just shrugs her shoulders and replies:

*»I think he's still sitting in the helicopter staring at his computer.«*

Jan thinks for a moment and then gives Gianna the clear instruction:

*»You go back to the helicopter now, too, and keep him company there. You'll be relatively safe up here in the parking lot. And tell the pilot to come down to the dam with us!«*

Jan, Braunweger and the two commissioners run as fast as they can from the parking lot down to the dam wall. A private road closed to public traffic leads them onto the vast company grounds.

*»From this gate on, all unauthorized persons are strictly forbidden to enter,« the Commissario shouts, pointing to the broken lock on the barbed-wire steel fence.*

Jan and Braunweger recognize at first glance that someone has used brute force to gain access here. However, they don't dwell on this for long, but follow the road to the beginning of the drivable dam crest.

*»Over here!« the commissario shouts, running toward the entrance of a company building.*

In front of the entrance door, however, they almost trip over the body of the power plant employee lying on his back. Shocked, they stop. It is a gruesome sight. The man's broken eyes are wide open, staring into the blue sky. He gives the impression that he is still gazing in horror into the face of his killer. In the center of his forehead, the blood-encrusted bullet hole of the nine-millimeter weapon is clearly visible. The gunshot residue on his face suggests that the killer was standing directly in front of him when he fired the fatal shot. Fortunately, those present are spared the sight of the back of his head for the most part. However, the huge pool of blood and the spilled brain matter leave no doubt that he did not suffer for long. Jan and the secretary of state turn aside in disgust and follow the detectives into the interior of the building. There, a steep staircase leads down. Jan pulls his pistol from its holster and runs after the other men. But they don't get very far. When they try to enter a narrow corridor, it's the end of the line.

*»From here on, the path is buried,« the commissioner shouts, pointing to the huge pile of rocks that makes any progress impossible.*

*»Looks like a small blast has already taken place here!« Jan answers and tries desperately to clear away the rough rubble blocks with his bare hands.*

The other men do the same and also start digging their way. When they suddenly hear a voice behind them, they flinch. They didn't hear the pilot coming, who had left his helicopter at Gianna's behest and gone in search of his superior.

*»Did you see the body up there?« he asks the four men, visibly shocked, who are clearing away stone after stone like buried miners.*

*»You've probably never seen a dead person before?« Braunweger asks, rattling a large boulder.*

The pilot is about to give him a hand when one of the commissioners' cell phone rings and he makes a short call. Then he reports:

*»That was the colleagues at the other end of the dam. Over there, it apparently looks the same as it does here. The entrance to the central maintenance tunnel inside the dam has been destroyed by an explosion. There is no access from over there either.«*

The men start digging like crazy again. Stone by stone they work their way through the pile of rubble. After a few minutes, Jan calls out with a gasp:

*»It's not going to work that way! I saw a tool room up in the building. We'll go up and see if we can find some shovels, picks, or other equipment. It'll take too long with our hands! I'm afraid that every minute counts from now on. If the bomb is in the maintenance tunnel of the dam, the place could blow up in our faces at any moment. Commissario, please call your colleagues and tell them to come back immediately and help us here. It's imperative that we get this buried passageway cleared! And we need every available hand to do it.«*

Then he pauses for a moment, thinks again, and finally turns to the pilot:

*»Please go up to the helicopter and ask David and Gianna if they would be willing to support us down here. It's almost noon and I'm really afraid we're running out of time!«*

## **Showdown**

Boris Luganov left his luxury hotel in the center of Aosta at the crack of dawn. Early in the morning, he began his work at the Place Moulin. He had to kill only one person, and he could dispose of the body of the craftsman at the same time, before it began to stink too much in the

loading compartment of the old Fiat. With his work done, he picked up a coffee-to-go and some croissants in Valpelline and headed for the Great St. Bernard Pass. On the way, he turned onto a dirt forest road and took his belated breakfast in the lap of Mother Nature. The coffee must have been decaffeinated. Because shortly thereafter a leaden tiredness overcame him and he caught up on a little of the sleep that had eluded him last night.

Now he feels like he's been reborn. »I'm still well ahead of time,« he thinks to himself as he looks at his gold Rolex watch. It is now shortly before twelve. He shouldn't arrive at the hospice too early. Otherwise he might still arouse suspicion.

His journey today will be very short anyway. Almost laughably short compared to the distances he had to cover in the past few days. It won't take another half hour from here to the top of the pass. At least that's what the navigation app on his new smartphone claims. At the top of the Great St. Bernard Pass, he'll check into the hospice, have lunch, and spend the rest of the day familiarizing himself with the local conditions. When his clients explained the plan to him, he thought the oldies had finally gone nuts. A hospice! On an Alpine pass! To him, hospice had always been another word for euthanasia facility. And as far as euthanasia was concerned, he had always had his own ideas. But then he had to be taught that the hospice on the Great St. Bernard is a hostel that was founded a thousand years ago exactly on the watershed between the Rhône and Po domains and has facilitated the crossing of the Alps for generations of travelers ever since.

This time the Saint Bernard dogs are the target of his clients. They have titled the action "Cattle Plague". As if a bunch of yapping mutts had anything to do with cattle! »But he who pays for the music may also wish for the melody,« thinks Boris Luganov and indifferently raises his shoulders. Then he will just provide the desired massacre of the famous St. Bernard breed up there. Only a few years ago, this breed returned to its roots on the top of the pass. Allegedly, these dogs used to rescue people buried in avalanches. And saved them from freezing to death with a barrel

of vodka they wore around their necks. »All humbug!« thinks Boris Luganov. To him, they're just slobbering, shitting filthy mutts that he'll turn into dog food, along with their whimpering brood of puppies. The little bit of explosive he still needs for this job is already connected with the ignition modules and is waiting for its use in the loading compartment of his car. Shortly after midnight - that's his plan - he will blow up the kennels and cages. And by that time, he will already be far away from the scene again.

But everything in order! One after the other! Everything to its time! Now the time of the "Flood" has come. Boris Luganov turns his van around and drives back to the main road. His employers have impressed upon him that he should not blow up the dam too early in the morning. They want to prevent the population from being surprised while they are asleep. As if that would still play a big role in such an act! To want to tear thousands of people into the sure death and then to get scruples concerning the execution! The old gentlemen of the organization have already brought him often with their special wishes to the edge of the insanity. But as they say: The customer is king!

Boris Luganov drives up the pass road at a leisurely pace and stops after ten minutes in a small parking bay. He probably won't find a better place. This is where it's supposed to be! He turns the ignition key and stops the old diesel engine. What a paradisiacal silence reigns up here! He rolls down the side window and lets the fresh, clear mountain air flow into the driver's cabin. A few jackdaws circle above the mountain slopes, scolding as if to urge the foreign intruder to drive on. Only from the bottom of the valley something like a siren can be heard. Boris Luganov thinks he can make out the town of Aosta in the haze. Way down there - where the Dora Baltea river drains the meltwater from the Mont Blanc massif toward the Po Valley. To the left of Aosta must be Valpelline. And again to the left of it - to the east - the Buthier valley. It's a pity that he can't see all the way to the dam wall from here. One of the mountains in front of it blocks his view. But if he presses the button right now, the rising explosion cloud will

be impossible to miss from here, too. When he looks at his wristwatch again, he notices his goose bumps. Twelve o'clock noon! Whoever is still in bed now has only himself to blame. Now it's »Save yourself!« And the person who is being attacked can't run away anyway. Now it becomes serious. Take another deep breath.

Boris Luganov picks up his smartphone and starts the bomb app. Two large red buttons light up for him. The third button - the one labeled "Blood" - has turned gray. Carefully, he presses the red button with the title "Flood." Now let's not make any careless mistakes! Such a spectacular accident at work would not be recoverable by any insurance company. A request to confirm the action appears on the display:

*»Flood - Are you sure?«*

Boris Luganov's gaze wanders once again over the Alpine valleys ahead of him. For a few more seconds, he lets the wonderful silence affect his ears.

*»Rapidus! - Subitus! - Tinnitus!« he shouts loudly to the jackdaws and presses the "Yes" button as hard as he can.*

Immediately afterwards, a huge detonation wave thunders through the southern Alps.

## **Final countdown**

*We're leaving together,  
But still it's farewell  
And maybe we'll come back  
To earth, who can tell?  
I guess there is no one to blame  
We're leaving ground (leaving ground)  
Will things ever be the same again?  
It's the final countdown<sup>74</sup>*

...

## **Flashback - One minute earlier at the Place Moulin dam:**

David had just hacked into the ignition module manufacturer's cloud service with his notebook. The assassin's user name was Jennerwein; that

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<sup>74</sup> Excerpt from the song "The Final Countdown" by the group Europe

much was clear after reading the forum posts. The password, on the other hand, caused difficulties: flood, plague, blood, valpelline - all the words David tried were acknowledged with an error message.

*»You have to type in a word that's not in the dictionary!« shouted Gianna, who sat next to him in the helicopter and watched his futile efforts spellbound.*

*»I know that,« David replied. »That's easy for you to say!«*

How was he supposed to quickly figure out a secure password by guessing? Then he had an epiphany: he typed "watercleanup" and pressed Enter.

*»Welcome Jennerwein!« came as a reply from the cloud.*

At the same moment, the helicopter pilot came running:

*»You are to come down immediately! We need to uncover the access to the maintenance tunnel and urgently need your help!«*

*»We'll be right there!« David shouted, staring at the screen in fascination. »One minute to go!«*

*»Look!« Gianna exclaimed. »There are the code names for the attacks: Blood, Flood, and Plague. Why is 'Blood' gray and not red like the other two?«*

*»Because the ignition of this module has already been done and cannot be activated again!«*

*»You have to deactivate the red modules!«*

David clicked on the "Edit" function and selected the "Flood" ignition module as the object to be edited. The software offered him Edit, Delete, Copy and Rename as possible options.

*»Press delete!« Gianna yelled and jumped up from her seat.*

David did as he was told, but an error message came from the cloud:



*»Error: Cannot delete object! Project is opened by another session!«*

Horried, the two stared at the red output window on the screen.

*»What does that mean?« Gianna cried in despair and dropped back onto the seat.*

*»That the project is still opened by someone else and therefore the ignition module cannot be deleted!«*

David and Gianna knew immediately what this meant. The person who was in the system at the same time could be none other than the assassin himself. And what he was up to was obvious.

*»We lost,« David stammered, about to flip his notebook shut.*

*»Rename it!« yelled Gianna all at once. »Switch the names of the detonator modules!«*

*»I can't,« David replied, shaking his head. »If you can't delete a module because the project is open, then you can't do a rename in it. That would be illogical!«*

*»Don't cry, just try it!« Gianna yelled at him.*

David tried to change the ignition module name from "Flood" to "Plague".

*»Error: Name already exists!« came as a response from the cloud.*

*»Shit, shit, shit!« Gianna screeched. »What are we going to do?«*

David, meanwhile, looked fascinated at the error message. His mouth suddenly seemed to smile in delight.

*»The program finds fault with the fact that the name already exists. I think we found a bug!« he said quietly.*

Then he turned "Flood" into "foo," "Plague" into "Flood" and finally "foo" into "Plague."

*»Renaming successfully completed!« the cloud server reported each time.*

*»Hocus - pocus - fidibus!« shouted Jan and flipped his notebook closed. »I think it worked. Now let's go quickly to the others!«*

As they exited the helicopter and made their way to the dam, they felt as if a weight had been lifted from their hearts.

*»Look down there!« David said, pointing to the endless parade of police and military vehicles that was moving up the steep mountain road to the dam with a flurry of blue lights and loud sirens.*

Shortly thereafter, a distant rumble of thunder rolled through the valley. Behind a mountain to the west, a huge cloud of dust formed, spiraling higher and higher into the atmosphere. David and Gianna stood motionless for a while and watched the spectacle.

*»I think, now we have all the time in the world,« David said, looking deep into Gianna's eyes.*

## Kiss-off

One week after the explosion, the Great St. Bernard Pass was reopened to traffic again. Miraculously, there were no casualties on the normally busy mountain road other than the assassin and a few mountain jackdaws. The DNA seized led to a hit in the databases of the Neva domain. It could be assigned to a professional criminal named Boris Luganov.

One month later, all the organization's masterminds were behind bars - or in a closed geriatric ward. The financial and material assets confiscated from the former managers exceeded all expectations. It enabled some domain finance ministers to plan their budgets for the coming years without any worries.

And half a year later wedding was celebrated in Vienna. Gianna and David got married and had invited all friends, relatives and acquaintances.

The Vatican felt obliged to make amends and donated six round-trip flights in one of its pilgrim planes. Thus it happened that Gianna's parents, Marco and Maria, and Daoud and Mohammad Al-Sayed, were able to attend the wedding festivities in the Danube domain.

David's father had not seen his missing brother for almost forty years. The joy of reunion was correspondingly great on both sides. Mr. Jonas senior was even a little envious of his big brother. Daoud Al-Sayed had certainly not had an easy time in Rome. Nevertheless, as a shoemaker, he was able to continue the family tradition and lead a self-determined life. And as it looked, his son Mohammad would take over the workshop one day and he could grow old surrounded by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Marco and Maria were now living in Trastevere again. For a while they had thought about finding a new flatmate for Gianna's room. But this plan soon became obsolete. Maria was three months pregnant and the happy couple had firmly planned the vacant room as a nursery.

Gianna's parents first had to travel inconveniently from Naples to Rome in order to be able to fly from there to Vienna. Although tourist planes arrive

in Naples almost daily, they were unable to change their pilgrimage tickets to one of these charter flights. But they would have done anything to finally see their daughter again and meet their son-in-law.

By far the oldest wedding guest was Professor Guggenmoser, who was becoming increasingly demented. Originally, he saw no reason to attend the celebration. But then he was worked on by his Russian nurse until he finally accepted. Ludmilla had given birth to a healthy baby boy only a month ago. She was immensely grateful to Gianna and David for their heroic act, which saved her child's life. Because this would one day enable little Igor to follow in the footsteps of his father, the village pharmacist of Valpeline.

Jan and Kevin were of course also invited to the celebration and had also spontaneously accepted. However, they got into a bit of a scheduling conflict because Jan's godchild Isabella was getting married on the same day. So they flew in late in the afternoon and missed the beginning of the ceremony. The first part of the long day they spent with Isabella and her parents Patrick and Elena in Cologne.

The old flatmates hadn't seen each other for ages and were happy to finally be able to chat about old times. Patrick and Elena had celebrated their silver wedding anniversary a few years ago and reminded Jan in many ways of his stuffy parents. Especially when Elena started talking about the upcoming vacation. She was eager to fly to her Spanish homeland, while Patrick was more inclined toward a beach vacation at the North Sea. Georg, their fifteen-year-old son, had accompanied his parents on vacation every time so far. Carmen, his older sister, sometimes opted out. Last year, she had gone on vacation with three friends. They camped on the Dutch island Texel for two weeks. But that's another story.

- End -

## Afterword by Alfred DeMichele

Dear Reader,

First of all, I would like to apologize. Some things in this novel are not quite correct! Not politically correct, not historically correct, not geographically correct and definitely not grammatically, orthographically, stylistically and translated correct. I apologize, but I am not sorry. On the contrary: I wanted it that way!

I had to write this novel because otherwise it would have torn me apart. Now that it's finished, I feel better again. The question is why I publish it and not keep it under lock and key. Probably out of curiosity to see how it develops in the public domain.

You may wonder why I provide this novel anonymously and under a Creative Commons license.

The latter is easily answered by a counter-question: Why should I entrust this novel to a publisher? It is not my intention to make money with it. I earn enough money elsewhere, and anyone who has read the novel should understand why I consider the accumulation of financial assets to be a pointless undertaking at the moment.

The question of anonymity is harder to justify: The answer probably lies in the three different ingredients from which this work was stirred together:

**Facts:** I consider many things that are thematized in the novel to be inevitable, authentic and true. I am sure that these things have happened or will happen in this way.

**Assumptions:** I am unsure about other topics. For example, because I have done sloppy research or have not yet found a clear point of view. Or where - as of today - one simply cannot yet know what the future will bring.

**Fantasy:** Much of this novel is fictional or even lacks any human logic.

The anonymity allows me to leave everything as I have written it down. Each reader may make an assignment for each passage to one of these

three categories. However, I do not want to justify myself, nor do I want to serve as a public projection surface for other world views. Besides, I do not see myself so much in the role of the author. This novel was written by life. The life of many people, which I look at with my personal glasses. If you have a different perspective on things, you are welcome to rewrite the novel so that it conforms to your way of looking at things. The CreativeCommons license allows and expressly wishes this!

Maybe one day I'll change my mind and face the criticism. At the moment, however, I would like nothing more than simply to be left alone with my thoughts.

Germany, spring 2018

Alfred DeMichele

# References

The representation of the river basin map on the book cover is courtesy of Robert Szucs:

<https://www.grasshoppergeography.com/>

The figure showing river basins and European watersheds is taken from Wikipedia:

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wasserscheide#/media/File:Europ%C3%A4ische\\_Wasserscheiden.png](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wasserscheide#/media/File:Europ%C3%A4ische_Wasserscheiden.png)

Drawing created 06/2004 by Sansculotte

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The description of the Vajont disaster is based on the following (german) sources:

Stuttgarter Zeitung: 50 Jahre nach dem Bergsturz von Vajont - Aus 2000 Toten nichts gelernt?

<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.50-jahre-nach-dem-bergsturz-von-vajont-aus-2000-toten-nichts-gelernt.37aa8a5f-d820-41de-87b8-68e28bb2754d.html>

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: Tragödie von Langarone: Ein Tsunami im Stausee:

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/ungluecke/tragoedie-von-langarone-ein-tsunami-im-stausee-12607724.html>

National Geographic: 54 - Sekunden vor dem Unglück - Die Flutwelle von Vajont:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oXynEXqXB8>

The following music undoubtedly had an inspiring effect (list is incomplete):

Falco: Junge Römer

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu8lSKaqM\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu8lSKaqM_0)

Anton Karas: Der dritte Mann

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oEsWi88Qv0>

Richard Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg – Stolzing's Preislied

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q5oabSgBBw>

Max Schneckenburger / Karl Wilhelm: Die Wacht am Rhein

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKkRS4rL6Pw>

Dire Straits: Brothers in Arms

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhdFe3evXpk>

Bushido & Karel Gott: Für immer jung

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxRRRkXNRcY>

Europe: The Final Countdown

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jK-NcRmVcw>

Tegernseer Zwoagsang: Wildschütz Jennerwein

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BljyWZZrhX4>

## Version history

Version	Date	Author/Translator	Comment
0.9-ADM	16.02.2018	Alfred DeMichele	Original version
1.0-ADM	01.04.2021	Alfred DeMichele	New cover and minor corrections
1.0-ADM-EN	02.06.2021	ADM/DeepL	English translation



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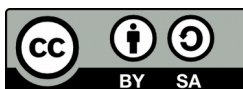
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